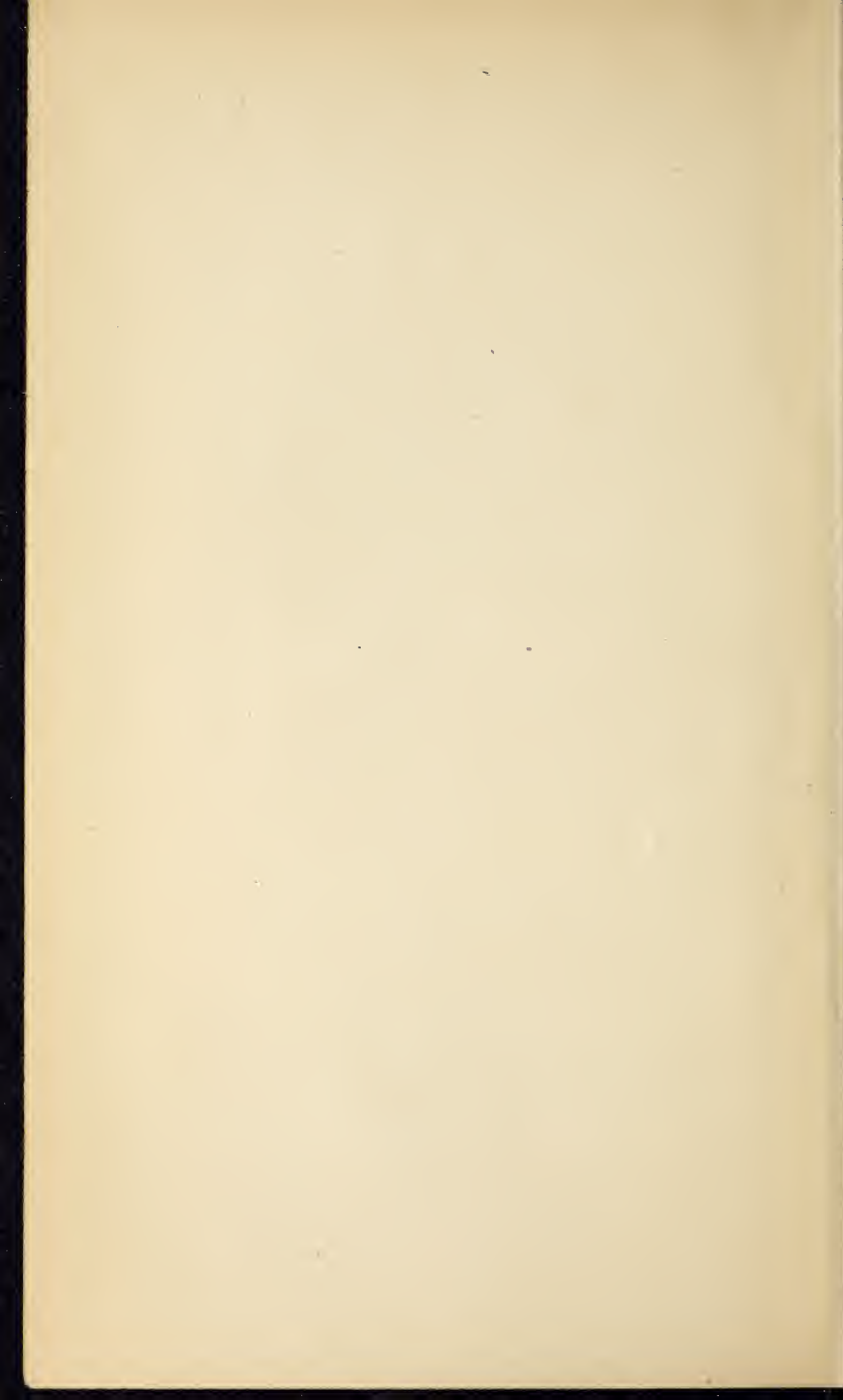


MIDNIGHT AT MEARS HOUSE

HARRISON JEWELL

HOLT



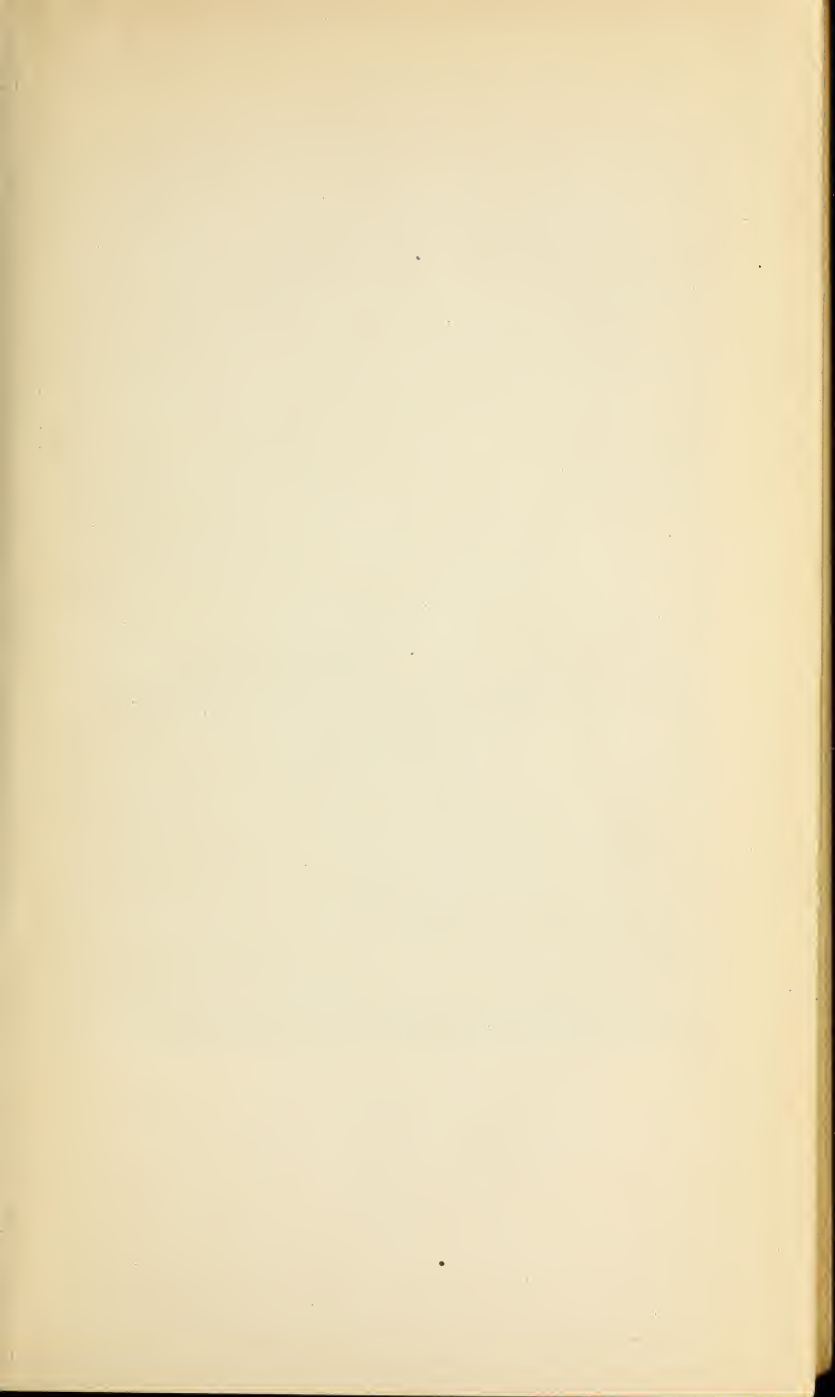






Midnight at Mears House







He was sitting straight up with both arms stretched out in front of him and there was a terrible rigidity about him (page 316)

Midnight at Mears House

A Detective Story

By

HARRISON JEWELL HOLT

Author of

"THE CALENDARED ISLES"



NEW YORK

DODD, MEAD AND COMPANY

1918

#V2345

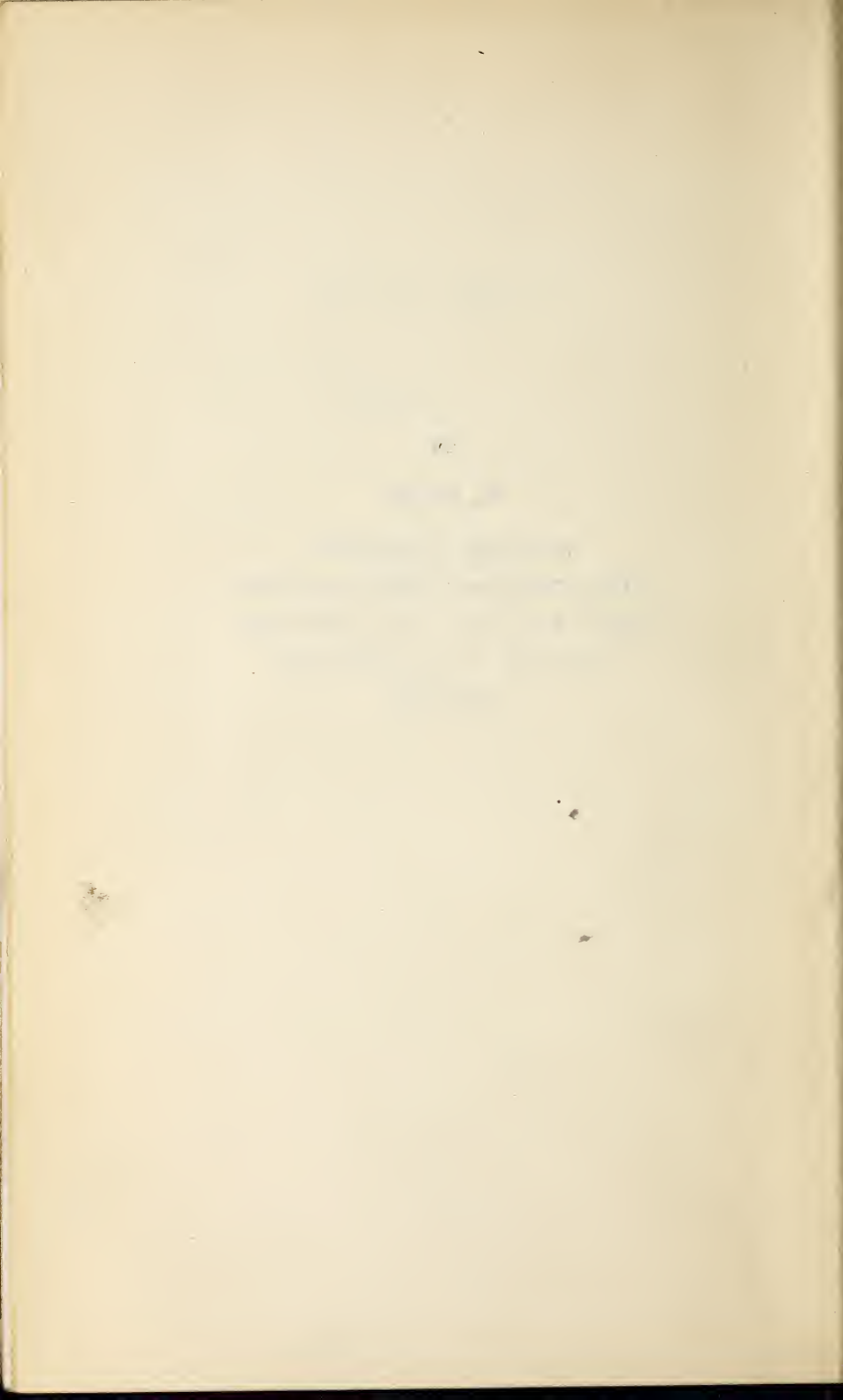
H
cop. 1

COPYRIGHT, 1912, BY
DODD, MEAD AND COMPANY

TO

C. B. H.

IN WHOSE FRIENDSHIP
THE AUTHOR HAS FOR MANY YEARS
FOUND BOTH JOY AND INSPIRATION
THIS BOOK IS AFFECTIONATELY
DEDICATED



CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I I FIND MEARS HOUSE MASTERLESS . . .	3
II THE PARALYTIC MAN	12
III I BEGIN TO DOUBT MY OWN EYES . . .	20
IV ARTHUR TELLS ME SOME QUEER THINGS . .	30
V WE DECIDE TO ASK HELP OF THE BLIND . .	45
VI A FACE AT THE WINDOW	57
VII I STUMBLE UPON A CLUE	68
VIII THE MAN IN THE GRAY FELT HAT . . .	77
IX STEPHEN GARTH	88
X MARGARET DISAPPEARS	102
XI TWO STRANGERS ARRIVE	113
XII GARTH DOES AN ASTOUNDING THING . . .	129
XIII A NIGHT OF SURPRISES	141
XIV BLINDMAN'S BUFF	151
XV I DISOBEY ORDERS	165
XVI JONATHAN MEARS OFFERS A SUGGESTION . .	179
XVII EIGHT O'CLOCK COMES	188
XVIII ON THE SHORE ROAD	199
XIX I PLAY THE FOOL ERRANT	212
XX WE GO ON A VAIN QUEST	226
XXI GARTH MAKES SOME AMAZING STATEMENTS .	236
XXII WE HIRE A BUTLER	247

CHAPTER		PAGE
XXIII	MRS. BARTLETT PUTS HER FOOT DOWN . . .	257
XXIV	I MAKE A PROMISE AND BREAK IT . . .	270
XXV	IN THE TOWER-ROOM	281
XXVI	GARTH TABLES HIS CARDS	292
XXVII	AN INTERRUPTED STORY	307
XXVIII	I SEEK THE ANSWER TO A RIDDLE . . .	317
XXIX	WHY MARGARET WOULDN'T BID ME GOOD-NIGHT	327

Midnight at Mears House



CHAPTER I

I FIND MEARS HOUSE MASTERLESS

IT was on Friday, the 15th of October, 19—, that I left New York by the Deephaven Express to go to Mears House for a fortnight's shooting with Arthur Keaton.

For several seasons I had been in the habit of spending one or more weeks with him there on the Maine coast, tramping over the Braxton Marshes after snipe and plover, lying hid in a duck-blind among the sedges of Great Pond, or searching the pine woods for partridges. Those days were among the happiest of my life; for ever since I was old enough to handle a gun, I have been enthusiastic over shooting. Arthur and I had more, too, in common than the somewhat barbarous delight—as I have since come to consider it—of killing things; and though I never liked his uncle, David Mears, a silent, morose man and difficult to get on with, he kept by himself so much that I rarely saw him except at dinner. He spent his evenings alone in the big library, where he read or wrote sometimes till long after midnight, and he was still abed when we

had finished breakfast and started off for the day.

I remember how relieved I used to feel when we were rid of his company, and I have often wondered how much of that feeling was due to a natural aversion for the society of a much older man of different tastes, and how much of it to an instinctive repugnance to the man himself. I know only that I never succeeded in overcoming this dislike of him. With no valid reason for it, I grew to distrust and even hate him, so much so that on one or two occasions I came close to showing it.

So strong did this antipathy grow that I vowed more than once not to visit Mears House again, and though I soon repented of such a resolution, I doubt if eventually I should not have ceased my annual visits there altogether, had it not been for the coming of David Mears' ward, Margaret Ellis. Not that I fell in love with the girl, a mere chit of seventeen—I was as far from that as flying; but her arrival made a wonderful change in the whole atmosphere of the big house. While before it had been as cheerless and unhomelike as a barracks, she made it seem pleasant and habitable. More than that, she contrived in some mysterious fashion to make the other members of the household, including even the servants, reflect some of her sunshine and good spirits. I recall with what a sharp sense of surprise I first

heard the sound of her laughter in that house: it seemed so foreign and unnatural, but none the less gracious and pleasing. Even David Mears lost much of his habitual taciturnity and gloom. It was wonderful to see his sombre face light up when she came into the room, and to note the change in his voice when he spoke to her. Had she been his own daughter he could not have loved her more, nor could she have been any fonder of him. It made me wonder sometimes if I did not judge him too harshly.

Mears House was situated three miles from Shelburne Village on a bluff overlooking the sea. It had been built of grey sandstone by a retired sea-captain of ample means and a peculiar taste in architecture. A great square tower three stories in height dwarfed the rest of the house, and gave it a half-finished look, which was further emphasised by its standing alone on a sharp rise bare of trees. It had few windows, and these were small, deep-set, and high, so that the interior of the house was but poorly lighted. The rooms on the ground floor were lofty, raftered, and panelled in Spanish oak, and the furnishings were all of rather a dark and gloomy character. A stone stairway at the back of the big hall led to a second story which contained five bedrooms. There was also a sixth room in the tower which was never used. The kitchen and servants' quarters were in an ell at the back. A big wooden stable with outhouses stood on

lower ground some hundred yards away from the house, connected with it by a circular driveway.

When David Mears bought the place it had long been untenanted. He must have spent considerable money putting the house in repair and refurnishing it throughout. Externally, however, he did nothing to improve the property, which included about seventy-five acres of fine meadow-land and nearly as much more of rough pasture and woods, so that it soon became an ugly wilderness of weeds and bushes. Even the grounds about the house were never cared for till Margaret Ellis came. She persuaded him to hire a man to look after them, and to have him lay out a little flower-garden for her on the south side of the house; but when she suggested clearing the abandoned meadow-land and planting it, David Mears shook his head. "I'm no lout of a farmer," he said; and when she laughingly asked him why he chose to live on a farm then, he answered shortly, "Because I choose to." And that, so far as I know, was the only reason he ever gave for settling in that out-of-the-way spot. He had some strong motive for doing so, of that there could be no question, since he hated the country and took no pains to hide the fact. Arthur and I often speculated as to what that motive could have been, but though we gave free rein to our imaginations, we never dreamed of anything so strange and terrible as the actual truth.

I must acquit Arthur, indeed, of any clear perception of his uncle's character, or the least knowledge of the circumstances which drove him to live there. His mother, an elder sister of David Mears, had eloped at nineteen with the son of a wealthy old Boston family, who had gone West to visit a college chum in Mansfield where the Mears lived. She had died a year later, when Arthur was born. His father was killed soon afterward in a railway accident; and he had been brought up by an aunt in strict ignorance of his mother's relatives, of whom she did not approve and of whom she never spoke. After being graduated from Harvard he had gone to Europe to study art, and had spent some years there. It was indeed quite by accident, in the course of a walking-trip one summer after his return, that he had stumbled upon Mears House and learned who David Mears was. He had fallen in love with that part of the Maine coast, whose rugged bits of scenery made splendid material for his brush; and although David Mears felt no especial liking for him, he was not averse to having someone to share his exile and lighten the expense of running the place.

But though they had lived together for five years, there existed no real intimacy between the two men—they had too little in common. It was not ties of relationship or affection which kept them under one roof; but chiefly the fact that each found Mears

House so admirably suited as a dwelling-place, David Mears for certain reasons of his own, and Keaton because it afforded him unsurpassed opportunities for practising his art as a sea and landscape painter.

Of his merits as an artist it would be absurd of me to speak: I am ill-qualified to judge of such matters; but whatever his skill with pigments, he was certainly an enthusiastic sportsman and a splendid shot. I want no better companion with whom to beat a covert, or watch for the rush of wings over the decoys in the grey light of dawn. I had indeed but one fault, or rather two, to find with him—his oftentimes distressing lack of humour, and his hatred of letter-writing. Though it was now nearly six months since I had seen him, he had written to me but once in all that time, and then only to ask me if I would attend to some trifling law business for him. Of Jonathan Mears, David Mears' brother, he said nothing, though it seems hardly credible that he should not even have mentioned the man's arrival; for as I learned afterward it went far to upsetting the peace and happiness of the whole household, and produced an extraordinary change in David Mears himself. But I was quite ignorant of all this when I entered the train that October morning; and it was with no thought of finding things any different at Mears House that I looked forward to my visit there.

The Deephaven Express was as usual much behind time, and it was after ten at night when it finally stopped with a series of protesting jerks at the tiny flag-station of Shelburne. I had expected to find Arthur waiting for me, and I was much surprised and not a little annoyed that he was not there. In all the years I had been coming to Mears House it was the first time he had failed to meet me.

I lighted a cigar and walked up and down the platform, listening impatiently for the sound of wheels. After a while I decided to leave my gun and grips, and walk along the Shore Road till I met him. The night was very dark, but warm for the time of year, with a hint of rain in the air. I had hardly got beyond the edge of the village when a few drops fell, and I was strongly inclined to turn back and regain the shelter of the station; but as I felt sure that Arthur could not be much longer coming, I decided to keep on. I had gone perhaps half a mile farther when I heard, some distance ahead, the sound of a horse and carriage approaching rapidly. He was certainly making up for lost time, I thought.

"Hello, Arthur!" I cried when the vehicle was within hailing distance. "You're a nice sort of a host to get here an hour late. What the devil do you mean by it?"

Instead of answering, the man in the buggy gave his horse a lash with the whip, and dashed past me

without a word. He came within an inch of running over me. I stood and stared after him in open-mouthed amazement.

"Well, of all fool performances!" I muttered. "A nice, hospitable set of neighbours Arthur's got! Thought I was going to hold him up, I suppose, the silly idiot." I snorted at the absurdity of the idea. There was nothing to do, however, but to plod along on foot, which I did, still hoping that Arthur might appear at any moment. But he did not come, and I began to think that probably he hadn't received the telegram I had sent him the night before, and so wasn't expecting me till the next day. The Shelburne telegraph service had always been very bad, I remembered. It was time someone complained about it, and I determined to do so the first thing in the morning.

It was a little before midnight when I finally reached Mears House. The rain had ceased, and a wind had sprung up, but the sky was still heavily overcast. As I toiled up the driveway I could hear the soft pounding of the surf, and a loose window-blind banging on its hinges. There were no lights in the house, and I had to fumble about in the darkness to find the doorbell. I rang again and again, but no one came. I went around under Arthur's window and called to him, at first softly, then at the top of my voice. He did not answer. I went back and pounded on the door. Then I seized the knob

and shook it violently. A second later I was sprawling on my hands and knees in the hall.

I scrambled to my feet, expecting to find Arthur or one of the servants at my elbow—for the door, I knew, was never left unlocked: David Mears saw to that every night himself. He had an extraordinary dread of thieves. To my amazement there was no one there. I struck a match and peered about. One glance around the big hall showed me that I was quite alone. I was frankly puzzled. Someone, I felt sure, had opened the door at the exact moment that I shook the knob. Who was it? What had become of him?

With a sudden uneasy sense of something wrong I lighted a lamp that stood on the hall table, and with it in my hand I started to explore the adjoining rooms. The library door stood ajar, and I pushed it open and went in.

Almost upon the threshold I came upon the dead body of David Mears. He was lying doubled up on his right side, his head over his left shoulder, his wide-open eyes staring straight up at me with a frightful look of fear and hatred.

CHAPTER II

THE PARALYTIC MAN

FOR perhaps a minute I stood there looking at him. Then I backed slowly out of the room and shut the door. I felt weak and dizzy, and I put down the lamp and sat down with my head in my hands.

Gradually as my nerves got steadier I began to feel irritated, even angry. "Why," I thought, "should I, a decent, orderly person with no love of tragic adventure, no morbid craving for excitement, be made to trudge three miles through the rain at dead of night to find a man murdered in his library? When by rights I should at this moment be abed and asleep, why should I find myself keeping lonely vigil outside a death-chamber?" It was absurd, preposterous! I vowed that if there were another soul in the house, I would find him and make him share the horror of my discovery.

I picked up the lamp and began to climb the flight of stone stairs at the back of the hall. Just as I reached the top step I thought I heard someone moving stealthily on the floor below. I stood a moment listening, and then, hearing nothing more, I went part

way down, where I could command a view of the whole hall. If there had been anyone there a moment before, he had disappeared. The front door stood wide open as I had left it in the excitement of my sudden entry, and I hastened to shut and double bolt it. Then I reclinbed the stairs and looked in the rooms above.

They were all unlocked and empty—Arthur's, which I entered first, half-dreading to find him murdered also, David Mears' room, Margaret's, and the two guest-chambers. Except the room in the tower, which I knew was unfurnished and never occupied, there remained only the servants' quarters in the ell. I was about to explore them when I heard someone sneeze, someone in the tower-room. Why there should be anything reassuring in the sound of a good, hearty sneeze, I don't know. Very likely upon most men in my position it would have produced quite the opposite effect; but after the first start which it gave me I breathed more easily. Doubtless it was from relief at finding there was someone alive in the house besides myself. And so without a second's hesitation I made for the tower-room, and knocked at the door.

As there was no answer, I pushed it open, and stood facing a man seated in a big armchair at the farther end of the immense room. Except for the lamp in my hand, the room was unlighted, and at first glance

I could see only that he was of huge bulk and astonishingly bald, with a great hooked nose and small beady eyes.

"Well," he said sharply, "who are you and what do you want?"

"I want your help," I replied.

"Eh?" he snapped, leaning forward a trifle in his chair and frowning at me. "Speak up, can't you? I'm deaf."

"I want your help," I repeated in a louder voice.

"You do, eh?" he growled. "Well, suppose you answer my questions first as to who you are and what you are doing in this house. It's a matter which I think you'll admit may reasonably require an explanation—that is, unless you're used to having strangers burst into your room at all hours of the night," he added drily. "I'm not."

"It's simple enough," I returned, irritated at his tone. "I heard someone sneeze in this room, and I came to see who it was. You didn't answer my knock, so I thought possibly I might have been mistaken and opened the door to find out if there was anyone here or not."

"Very good," he said, studying me suspiciously through his narrow slits of eyes; "but that doesn't explain——"

"See here," I broke in angrily. "What do you

take me for, a thief or a murderer? Do I look like one?"

"No, no, of course not; but as I remarked before, your coming was somewhat unexpected, and I'm naturally curious to learn——"

"Who I am and what I am doing in this house," I interrupted.

He nodded.

"You shall," I went on curtly, placing the lamp on the table and sitting down facing him. "I don't know who you are, either, for that matter," I began, "or how long you've been a member of this household; but very likely you know that Mr. Keaton was expecting a visit from an old friend of his, Philip Scarsden?"

He nodded again, still watching me closely. I took some letters out of my pocket and passed them over to him.

"Perhaps these will satisfy you of my identity, Mr.——"

"Mears," he put in, "Jonathan Mears."

"Not David Mears' brother?" I exclaimed.

"Yes," he said, looking quickly up at me. "What of it?"

"I've bad news, terrible news for you," I replied; and I went on to tell him the circumstances of my arrival, and of the gruesome discovery I had made. He listened to me without a word, with hardly a

change of expression. When I had finished, I waited for him to speak. He seemed in no hurry to do so, but sat frowning, apparently deep in thought.

"I'm glad of it," he said at last, rather as though he were speaking to himself than to me. "I'm glad he's dead." My amazement must have shown plainly in my face, for he added sharply, "I've hated him all my life"; and relapsed into a fit of gloomy silence.

I had not expected him to show much grief at his brother's death—David Mears, as I have said, was not a lovable man—but I was shocked at the brutal frankness of his words. They roused in me a sudden loathing for the man.

"You'll help me carry him upstairs, at any rate," I said. "We can't let him lie there—like that."

"He can lie there till he rots, for all I care," was the fierce reply. "I wouldn't stir a finger to help you, if I could, and I couldn't if I wanted to. Both my legs are paralysed: they're as much use to me as sticks of dead wood. And he used to come up here and laugh at me—damn him!" His voice shook with rage. "And you wonder why I don't cry out at his death, why I don't pretend to be all broken up over it. It shocks and horrifies you. You think me a monster——" He laughed mirthlessly. "If you'd had to put up with what I have—but never mind about that," he broke off. "He's dead, you say. I tell you again, I'm glad of it."

"Under the circumstances it's perhaps just as well you *are* paralysed," I said shortly.

"Otherwise people might think I murdered him myself, eh," he sneered. "It might well have come to that sooner or later," he added grimly. "I'm not a very patient man under abuse, Mr. Scarsden, and I wouldn't have stood for much more of his damned laughter."

"The man's dead," I reminded him sharply, "and whatever wrong he did you or anyone else, he's paid for it. He was no great friend of mine either, but for all that I don't intend to leave him lying there: it isn't decent. And since you can't help me," I added, rising, "I'm going to rouse one of the servants."

"You can spare yourself the bother of looking for them," he said. "They all left yesterday, the second lot within the week, too. Keaton's gone to town to get others; but he'll have a hard time of it, I imagine, finding any who'll come here."

I asked him why.

"Think the place is haunted," he explained. "Some fool of a chambermaid got to hearing mysterious noises—voices in empty rooms, screams outside the house at night, people tapping on the window-panes, God knows what foolishness. She told the rest about it, and scared 'em half out of their wits. They left in a body. And the next batch hadn't

been here two days till they heard about it, and off they went. There hasn't been anyone to cook a decent meal half the time the last month. If I hadn't a man of my own to look after me, I'd have starved to death by this time."

"Where is he?" I enquired.

"Drunk or drowned, I guess. I let him go deep-sea fishing this afternoon. He ought to have been back eight hours ago."

"And when did Keaton expect to return?" I asked.

"He didn't tell me."

"And Miss Ellis?"

"She's visiting friends somewhere in the White Mountains, I believe: been away nearly a month."

"We're all alone in the house, then," I said.

"Unless you count the old woman in"—he meant Mrs. Bartlett, the housekeeper, I knew—"and she's laid up in bed with a cold."

"Then I must get him upstairs by myself, if I can," I said.

"You ought not to have much trouble doing it," he remarked indifferently. "He doesn't weigh very much. By the bye," he called after me as I went out, "I'm rather tired sitting here. You might help me to bed when you're through."

I was inclined to echo his remark about David Mears lying there till he rotted for all he cared; but

I thought better of it, and made no reply at all.

The big hall looked bigger and gloomier than ever as I descended the stone staircase as quietly as I could, listening intently for any sound and peering sharply from side to side with an exaggerated caution for which, I suppose, my overtaxed nerves were mainly responsible. I certainly did not expect to find anyone lurking there, and I am not ordinarily a timid man; but I must confess to a feeling of relief when I found the hall empty. I hesitated a moment, however, before entering the library—the horror of those staring, upturned eyes shaking my resolution; but in another moment I had got the better of this weakness and opened the door.

I started back with a sharp cry of amazement. The body had disappeared!

CHAPTER III

I AM FORCED TO DOUBT MY OWN EYES

I STOOD for some time on the threshold of the library, staring stupidly at the place where David Mears' dead body should have been. Then I entered the library and looked for it; I went into the dining-room and hunted there. It was not until I had exhausted every possible hiding-place in both rooms that I could believe it had actually disappeared.

"Why," I asked myself "should anyone make off with a dead man?" It seemed incredible that the murderer himself should have done it. What object could he have in returning to the scene of his crime and carrying away his victim? Was it not absurd to suppose that he would add to the risk of detection by doing such a thing? Who, then, had removed the body, and what had been his motive? The more I puzzled over the problem, the harder it became. Finally I gave up trying to solve it. I was too tired to think clearly. The reaction from the shocks and surprises of the past few hours had set in, and I felt a great need of rest and sleep.

The next thing I knew it was broad daylight. I was sitting in David Mears' own chair in the library, blinking up at Arthur Keaton, who was smiling at me and saying something about a good conscience.

"Hello!" I cried, jumping up and shaking hands with him. "I'm mighty glad to see you. Why didn't you come to the station to meet me? Where've you been?"

Despite his smile and his hearty greeting, I was startled at the change in him. He looked years older than when I had seen him last. There were unfamiliar lines and hollows in his face. He had grown thinner, too, and seemed to have lost altogether that self-poise and ease of manner which had always characterised him.

"I wasn't expecting you till to-night," he replied. "As to where I've been——" He hesitated. "I've got a lot to tell you, Phil," he continued soberly. "Suppose I get you some breakfast first—I've had mine; and then we can have a good talk. You'll want a bath and a change, too. Why didn't you go right up to your room instead of camping here all night?"

I told him. He listened to me in a sort of stupefied silence.

"You're quite sure, I suppose," he asked when I had finished, "that he was dead when you saw him?"

"Sure of it?" I repeated blankly. "Of course I am. You don't think I dreamed it all, do you?"

"He has fainting spells once in a while," he said. "It may have been one of those."

I shook my head.

"A man doesn't look that way in a faint. If you'd seen his eyes——" I broke off abruptly. Arthur had gone suddenly as white as chalk, and was swaying from side to side in his chair.

"What's the matter with you?" I cried. "Feeling sick?"

"It's nothing," he said hastily, struggling to control himself. "My nerves have gone back on me lately. I'll be all right in a moment."

I looked at him wonderingly. The last person on earth that I should have suspected of nerves was Arthur Keaton, and here he sat trembling before me like an overwrought, hysterical woman. It seemed impossible that the news of his uncle's death should have upset him so. He pulled himself together finally.

"I'm going to look for the body," he said. "I think I know where it is."

"You do!" I exclaimed. "Then I'll go with you;" but he wouldn't hear of it.

"You're all tired out, and you've had nothing to eat yet," he reminded me: "neither has that poor old codger upstairs——"

"Who can starve to death for all I care," I interrupted.

Arthur looked at me in surprise—I had spoken hotly.

"He's a queer fish," he admitted. "I didn't take a shine to him at first; but he isn't really such a bad sort when you come to know him."

"I daresay not," I remarked drily, "but I'm not particularly anxious to cultivate his acquaintance. However," I went on, a little ashamed of myself, "I don't mind getting breakfast for him, if you want me to."

"Come on, then, and I'll show you where things are," he rejoined. I followed him into the kitchen, and there he left me to struggle with a frying-pan and a coffee-pot, saying that he would be back soon.

Jonathan Mears was sitting just where I had left him when I went upstairs a few minutes later with the eggs and coffee. I had expected to find him in a bad humour; but he greeted me pleasantly enough, and said nothing about my not having come back to help him to bed. He even complimented me on the coffee, which he declared was the best he had tasted in a long while. By daylight he looked less huge and ugly, though he still reminded me of some big bird of prey with his great hooked nose, bald head, and beady little eyes. There was something about him, however—it may have been his

voice, or his smile, or possibly nothing more than his pitiable condition—which lessened my dislike and went far to remove the first unfavourable impression I had got of him.

Singularly enough, when I told him of the disappearance of the body, he asked me the same question that Arthur had—was I quite sure David Mears was dead when I saw him? . Absolutely sure, I told him, but for all that he seemed unconvinced.

“I suppose you think, just as Arthur does, that he had a fit or something,” I said; “but you’re wrong, both of you. I’m as certain he was dead as I could be if a dozen doctors had signed a certificate to the fact.”

“And I’m quite as certain he was alive.”

I turned to find Arthur standing in the doorway.

“You’ve found the body?” I cried.

He nodded.

“Just where I expected to find it—on the beach at the foot of the cliff. As soon as I heard your story, Phil,” he went on, “I knew at once what had happened. I felt sure you were mistaken in thinking he was dead, and that he had simply fallen in a faint. He must have come to while you were upstairs here, and gone out to get a breath of fresh air. Either he was suddenly taken faint again just as he reached the edge of the cliff, or else he made a misstep in the darkness, and fell to his death.”

"He did nothing of the sort," I retorted, "for the simple reason that he never left the house alive. I tell you again, I'm positive he was dead when I came in. It's ridiculous to suppose I could have been mistaken. If you'd seen his eyes, you wouldn't have the slightest doubt about it."

"I have seen them," he said. "They have a frightful look: it's only natural they should. He must have known the instant he fell what—was in store for him."

"You forget they were the same when I saw them," I rejoined, "and no man ever looked like that while he still had the breath of life in him."

"It seems to me," interrupted Jonathan Mears quietly, "that there's a very simple way of deciding the matter. If, as Mr. Scarsden thinks, David was dead when he saw him in the library, someone must have carried him out of the house and thrown him over the cliff; in which case there should be foot-prints or other marks to prove it."

"That's so," I said to Arthur. "We ought to be able to settle the question in no time; and you'll find that I'm right," I added.

Arthur made no reply, but turned abruptly, and led the way out of the house and along the path to the sea.

The shore there is in most places a sheer wall

of solid rock, split up and eaten away by the action of the waves. It is full of great fissures and strewn throughout its length with giant boulders. What little beach there is is rough-carpeted with stones and pebbles and washed clean of sand.

The body of David Mears was lying in a huddled heap by the side of a great jagged rock upon which he had evidently struck, for the whole back of his head was terribly crushed and mangled. I was spared another glimpse of his eyes—Arthur had already closed them; but his face wore exactly the same malignant, fear-distorted expression I had seen on it a few hours before.

Unlike his brother, David Mears was a small man, and we had no trouble carrying him up to the house, where we laid him on his bed, and spread a coverlet over him. Neither of us spoke a word while we were doing this. I saw Arthur shudder as he took hold of the body, but he showed no other sign of emotion except a feverish eagerness to finish the task. I took off one of the dead man's shoes, and we set out along the path to the cliff.

After the rain of the night before the ground was still soft, even muddy in places. We had gone but a few steps when we came upon a clear, deep footprint. I stooped down and put the shoe in it. It fitted perfectly.

"You see," said Arthur quietly, "I was right."

I was too astounded to reply. Even then I could not believe that David Mears had actually set foot there. If he had, it was earlier in the evening before I arrived, I was sure of that. Farther on we should find other tracks, I knew; but I was wrong. Step by step we followed the footprints to the very edge of the cliff, to the exact spot below which Arthur had found the body. There were no signs that anyone else had been there.

I began to wonder if after all my eyes had not played me a trick; if possibly David Mears had been merely unconscious, not actually dead, when I first opened the library door. I could not believe it. We had not yet made a careful search of the dining-room, I remembered. There must be something there or in the library to throw new light on the situation. I said as much to Arthur, and we hurried back to the house.

The library yielded us nothing, but we had no sooner entered the dining-room than Arthur stopped short.

"There *has* been someone here!" he exclaimed. "Look at that!" And he pointed to a massive brass candlestick on the table. The candle in it had burned nearly to the end, and the melted grease had run down on one side and hardened in a little pool at the base of it.

"I knew we should find something!" I cried ex-

ultantly; but my triumph over the discovery was short-lived.

"After all it proves nothing," said Arthur. "He probably left it there himself." And I had to agree with him. Everything else in the room was in its proper place: we hunted in vain for marks of an intruder.

"We may as well give it up," I said at last, "and notify the town authorities. Perhaps they'll have better luck." But I doubted it; for I felt sure they were possessed of no keener observation than my own.

Nor had I any reason to change my opinion when, a few hours later, Captain Ezra Bicknell, the head of the local police, a short, red-faced, very pompous individual, and the village coroner—who was also the town plumber, and appropriately enough of the same name as his trade—had left, after going over the premises, viewing the body, and hearing what we had to tell them.

Both of them were quite as convinced as Arthur that David Mears' death was due to his having fallen off the cliff. The footprints settled that matter conclusively for them; and they clearly thought my belief that he had been murdered too absurd to be worth serious consideration. In their opinion the absence of any marks on the head or body other than those resulting from the fall did away with the possibility that he had been the victim of foul play, particularly

as they found nothing whatever to indicate that there had been anybody in the house. Altogether they could see no reason for thinking it anything but an accident; and they had no doubt but that any coroner's jury in the country would agree with them.

I was beginning to think so myself. The facts certainly seemed to be all in favour of such a verdict; and yet I felt sure that my eyes had not deceived me, and that David Mears was lying dead there in the library when I entered the house.

CHAPTER IV

ARTHUR TELLS ME SOME QUEER THINGS

IT was after two o'clock when the rural guardians of the law left, and we lost no time in scraping together a hasty luncheon of crackers and tinned things. At Arthur's suggestion we took it up to Jonathan Mears' room and ate it there.

He was keenly interested in what we had to tell him, and disappointed, though evidently not greatly surprised, at our failure to find traces of anyone. I could see that he shared Arthur's opinion regarding the improbability of my murder theory; and though it but strengthened my resolve to prove that I was right, I determined to say no more about it till I should have some solid ground for doing so.

As neither Arthur nor I was in the mood for conversation, the meal would have been for the most part a silent one, had not the paralytic man taken the burden of talk upon himself. I could not help admiring the ability he displayed in his rôle of monologist, and the ease with which he slid from one topic to another, giving each its proper setting, throwing in a sharp-drawn bit of description here, an illumi-

nating anecdote there which invested what he said with life and colour. He was quite evidently exerting himself to distract our minds from the tragedy and to interest us in pleasanter things.

I found myself wondering why he did it, why he persevered in the face of our almost discourteous indifference; for both Arthur and I were too occupied with our own thoughts to be appreciative listeners, and he could not have failed to notice it. I was not long in hitting upon the reason—the man dreaded being left alone. He was afraid we would find his company dull, and prefer being by ourselves, and so he strove with all his might to be entertaining. There was something quite pathetic about it, I thought, and I felt a sudden pity for him. To be chained to a chair or a bed all one's life, unable to move a step, must be a frightful hardship, especially to one of his active disposition. No wonder he had hated David Mears for taunting him with his infirmity: it was a hideous thing to do, and I could understand his saying frankly that he was glad of his death.

But although my dislike of the man was gradually disappearing, I was not yet ready to admit that my first feeling of antipathy to him was based on nothing stronger than mere caprice. Behind that smiling, placid exterior lurked something sinister. Of that I felt sure, though why I could not have told. There

was nothing actually evil about his face. It was bold, predatory, unscrupulous, that was all. The large, loose-lipped mouth spoke of sensuality and greed, but not of cruelty or meanness. Even the close-set, hawk-like little eyes had nothing furtive or malignant in them. To look at him one would have said that he was only the swollen husk of a man, powerless alike for good or evil—a half-dead crater of burnt out emotions in which no volcano of fierce passions could possibly be smouldering.

Whether he was afraid of boring us if he talked too much, or whether he was shrewd enough to guess that we had private matters to discuss, he finally suggested that we try to find out what had become of his man, Randall.

“Unless the fool has tipped over and drowned,” he said, “it’s high time he appeared. Perhaps you wouldn’t mind helping me to bed before you go?”

I remember thinking that Randall must be unusually strong; for it was as much as both of us could do to lift him out of the chair and lay him on the bed. While we were doing so I was clumsy enough to tread heavily on his foot, and I was about to apologise for my awkwardness when I saw that he was quite unaware of it. An instant later I was again reminded in an odd way of his condition. We had propped him up against the pillows and started to help him off with his dressing-gown when

he missed his scarf-pin. He had taken it out to cut the leaves of a new book, he said, and must have stuck it into the arm of his chair. Then he gave a queer laugh and pointed down at his leg. There, buried nearly to the head in the insensible flesh, was the pin!

"Not such a bad place for it," he remarked cheerfully. "Always sure to have it handy. A pair of dead stumps has its advantages after all, you see, gentlemen: one can use 'em for pin-cushions." The conceit must have appealed strongly to his whimsical sense of humour, for he was still chuckling over it when we left him.

On our way downstairs I reminded Arthur of what he had said that morning about having a great deal to tell me.

"I've been waiting for a chance to all day," he replied; "but it's a long story, and there are some things in it—I don't know what to think of them," he broke off. "I've been lying awake nights wondering if they wouldn't end by driving me crazy."

"Nonsense!" I retorted. "There's nothing the matter with you, I guess, that you need worry about. You look a little short of sleep and fresh air, but that's soon remedied. A week's shooting with me, and you'll be as fit as they make 'em."

He said nothing.

"If you've got something on your mind, out with

it," I went on, "but don't talk any more rot like that: it gets on my nerves." I spoke jokingly, but I was more than half in earnest; for I was still feeling rather shaken, and I didn't relish the idea of having him go on acting as though he were in the grip of a nightmare. That kind of thing begins to have its effect after a while even on an unimaginative, easy-going person like myself.

I turned toward the library.

"Not in there!" he cried sharply. "I can't stand being shut up in this house any longer. It sickens me. Come for a walk."

I was glad enough to do so, for it was a clear, crisp afternoon; and we started at a brisk pace along the cliffs. On our left lay the sea, quiet and sparkling. Stony pasture-land overgrown with bayberry and juniper bordered the path, sloping down to a green and brown patchwork of woods and fields, beyond which we caught occasional glimpses of the Braxton Marshes, already threatened by the incoming tide. In another hour they would be under water—all but the hay-cocks scattered like huge, inverted acorns over their drab-coloured surface—and there would be great commotion among the snipe and plover. I longed for my gun and waders.

"I'd be willing to bet ten dollars," I thought, "that with my new 16-bore 'Harrington'——"

"Do you wonder I thought he was going

mad?" I became suddenly aware that Arthur was speaking.

"Who? What?" I said.

He stopped short and faced me with a bewildered frown.

"Haven't you heard what I've been saying?" he demanded.

"Not a word," I admitted. "I got to thinking what splendid sport we were missing over there"—I waved my arm toward the marshes—"and so I just woke up to the fact that you were talking."

He laughed shortly.

"I might have known you'd think of nothing but shooting as soon as we got in sight of the place."

"You're just as cracked about it as I am," I retorted.

"I used to be, I know; but just now——"

"You act like a man who's seen his own ghost," I broke in. "You go about looking like an undertaker. In these last six hours or so, ever since you found me asleep in the library, you've hardly opened your mouth. What the devil's the matter with you anyhow?"

"I'll be hanged if I know," he replied. "That's what bothers me. Perhaps when I've told you about it, you'll be able to make some sense out of it. I can't."

"Go ahead," I said, sitting down on a hummock

of dead ferns and relighting my pipe. "I'll try to keep my mind off the birds this time."

"It started three months ago when Jonathan Mears came," he began. "Up to then things had gone along the same as ever. I wasn't here when he and Randall arrived, so I can't tell you anything about the meeting between him and Uncle David. He wasn't any too glad to see the paralytic man, I guess—they hadn't set eyes on each other for thirty years; but of course he couldn't very well refuse to take him in, especially as he was dead broke and had nowhere else to go. I wish to G—d he had!" He paused an instant: then he went on.

"My Uncle David, as you know, wasn't an easy man to get along with; but he was never anything like what he got to be after his brother came. For days at a time you couldn't get a word out of him; and then he'd have the most childish fits of temper about nothing at all. Some of the things he said to me—well, if it hadn't been for Margaret, I'd have told him what I thought of him and cleared out. The way he treated the paralytic man was the worst of all. He'd go up to his room and sit there for hours, sneering at him and making fun of his paralysis, trying his best to goad him into a fury. I could hear him sometimes from my room, and I wonder Jonathan Mears didn't shoot him. Randall used to come out, looking fairly sick with disgust

and rage. 'You'll have to put a stop to it,' he'd say to me. 'It's inhuman: it's diabolical! The man must be mad to say the things he does.'

"I did try to stop my uncle going there. I spoke of it to him one morning when he seemed in a little better temper than usual. Even then I expected him to fly into one of his rages, and tell me to mind my own business; but he only smiled in a disagreeable sort of way. 'You forget, Arthur,' he said, 'that the man is my guest, and that I must do my best to amuse him and cheer him up. It's a great misfortune to be paralysed, a very great misfortune. I never realised how great before.' He chuckled. Then in a twinkling his mood changed. 'You mind your own affairs, do you hear,' he fairly shouted, 'and don't come telling me how to look after mine, or it'll be the worse for you. I know what I'm about.' 'I doubt if you do,' I thought; but I saw that it would do no good for me to say any more about it.

"There seemed but one thing left to do—get Jonathan Mears to leave. I thought he would be only too glad to go, if I gave him money, and I was willing enough to; but he wouldn't hear of it. 'He'll get tired of it after a while,' he said, 'and leave me in peace; and until he does, I must just make the best of it, that's all.' I told him I thought David Mears wasn't quite right in his mind, but he didn't agree with me. 'Oh, he's sane enough,' he said.

'If he weren't, I wouldn't care two straws what he said.'

"I couldn't believe, though, that any man in his senses would treat his own brother so; and yet in other respects he acted rationally enough. When Margaret was around he never lost control of himself, or said anything that could possibly hurt or offend her, and she knew nothing of how he behaved to his brother or me. If I'd told her, she wouldn't have believed me, she was so fond of him. I've often wondered how he could have made her care for him as she did."

"I suppose it was because she was the only human being he ever felt the least affection for," I said.

"You can imagine," Arthur went on, "what a pleasant time I had of it, trying to act as buffer between the two men, expecting at any moment there would be murder done, having to keep Margaret from knowing anything about it, and at the same time doing my best to appear as cheerful and light-hearted to her as ever. No wonder I'm a wreck! It was as fierce a job as any man was ever up against. Maybe I wasn't glad when she told me she was going to make the Duncans a visit! I must have seemed so, too; for she laughed and accused me of wanting to get rid of her. I managed to make a joke of it, but she gave me a rather queer look, as if she half suspected something.

"And now I'm coming to one of the queerest things about the whole business—the servants leaving."

"Jonathan Mears told me about that," I put in. "Said they got a notion the place was haunted—heard a lot of queer noises that only spooks could have made, and so forth."

"The funny part of it is, they were right, too. I heard some of the noises myself."

I grunted sceptically.

"Your nerves must be in worse shape than I thought," I said. "You didn't happen to see any sheeted ladies walking on the parapets or gliding through the halls, did you?"

"No," he rejoined soberly, "but I did hear things—Oh, I don't expect you to take any stock in it. I didn't myself at first; thought it was all rubbish naturally. Then one night I heard a scream right below my window. I was sitting up reading a novel. It was about eleven o'clock and everyone else had gone to bed. In two shakes I was downstairs and out the front door. I dashed around the corner of the house, expecting to find one of the maids having a fit, or being choked by a burglar—I had my Colt ready to take a shot at him. It was light enough to see clearly, though there was no moon. I didn't find a living soul, or sign of one."

"Sounds mysterious enough, I admit," I said.

"Sure you weren't dreaming? People have been known to fall asleep in their chairs late at night even over the most exciting romances."

"I'd like to believe it *was* a dream," he replied. "I'd feel a lot better."

He spoke so earnestly that for a second I found myself wondering if after all there might not have been something queer about it; but I soon dismissed the idea. Even if he hadn't been asleep, he was in just the state to hear a scream in every gust of wind rattling a blind or whistling down the chimney. I know the tricks a man's senses play him when his nerves are unstrung.

Arthur evidently realised that there was no use trying to convince me of anything inexplicable in the occurrence; for he said no more about it, but went on to tell me of the trouble they had had getting servants to stay, and of the fast increasing irascibility and uneasiness of David Mears.

"It looked as though he was in desperate fear of someone," he said, "and every day that passed made him worse. He got so he wouldn't go out of the house at all, and he spent hours putting new locks and bolts on all the doors and windows. He even sent for a set of burglar alarms which wouldn't work when they came. All this may strike you as a joke," he continued, "but there's something mighty catching about fear, even when you know there isn't really

anything to be afraid of. I began to get nervous, too, and I couldn't laugh myself out of it either.

"So when I heard him cry out a few nights ago—he was sitting all alone in the library as usual—I jumped up, grabbed my revolver, and ran downstairs. I found him in his chair unconscious, a newspaper open at his feet. I had the deuce of a time bringing him to, and after I had he looked like a man who's read his death-warrant. He was trembling all over. 'It's come, it's come,' he kept muttering. 'I knew it would.'

"I gave him a good stiff swig of brandy, and asked him what the trouble was. 'It's none of your damned business!' he cried, and then in a sort of whisper, 'You can thank God it isn't.' I started to pick up the paper. 'Leave it where it is!' he screamed. 'Do you think I want you meddling in my affairs! Haven't I told you before it'll be the worse for you, if you do? Get out of here, you——' I won't repeat the names he called me. A blind fury of rage seized me, and the next thing I knew I had him by the throat. There must have been murder in my face, I guess; for he cried out the word so that it rang horribly in my ears, and brought me to my senses. I let go my hold on him, and stood there shaking like a leaf at the realisation of what I had been near doing.

"He sat staring at me in dumb surprise. I sup-

pose he had come to think he could curse and insult me all he pleased without my resenting it—I had stood a good deal of it from him—and he seemed too amazed at finding out his mistake to say a word. We faced each other in silence for perhaps half a minute: then I turned and left him. It was the last time I saw him alive; for he kept to his room the next few days, and yesterday morning Mrs. Bartlett told me the servants had refused to stay any longer, and that meant another trip to Boston after a fresh lot. I thought of wiring you to meet me there, but I had no idea you'd be able to get away a day sooner than you expected to. If I'd received your telegram——”

“David Mears would be alive now in all probability,” I said.

“It all depends on when he had his attack, and whether we should have heard him or not. If we'd been upstairs at the time—it's a pity you didn't try to rouse him.”

“Rouse him!” I repeated. “How many times must I tell you that he was dead, stone dead when I saw him? For Heaven's sake see if you can't realise that! I should think from what you've just told me that you'd be even surer of it than I am. He was expecting an attempt on his life, that's clear enough. A man doesn't act the way you say he did without there being a pretty strong reason for it. He went

in mortal dread of someone. Who was it? That's what we must find out, and the first thing to do is to get hold of that newspaper. That'll tell us, if we're clever enough to put two and two together. There must have been something in it—some mention of the person he feared, probably—that bowled him over. His not wanting you to pick it up showed that it contained some reference of the kind, the clue to some secret which he was afraid you'd discover."

"Quite possibly," he returned, "but even if we came upon the right item, we'd have no way of telling it. You forget that we know nothing of his life before he came here, or the people who were mixed up in it."

"We've got to find out those things, then. Somebody knows, that's certain. I shouldn't wonder if Mrs. Bartlett could help us. She's been with him a long while, hasn't she?"

"Yes," he said, "but you might as well try to get information out of a post. She's the closest mouthed old party that ever lived, and she'd rather have her hand cut off than tell you anything she knows about him, especially anything discreditable."

I suggested our questioning Jonathan Mears.

"He doesn't know any more about him than we do," Arthur replied. "He left home thirty years ago, and from that day till he came here he hadn't seen his brother or heard a word from him."

"Where's he been all the time?" I asked.

"All over the lot—India, Africa, Australia, the Hawaiian Islands, Mexico. He was trying to grow rubber on the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, and making a mighty poor stab at it, he told me, when he became paralysed and had to quit. If it hadn't been for that, I don't believe he'd ever have come back at all. It must have been a pretty stiff dose for him to have to beg David Mears to give him a home—there was never any love lost between them, I guess, when they were boys."

"Well, it won't do any harm for us to have a look at that newspaper, if we can find it," I said. "Let's go back and hunt for it."

CHAPTER V

WE DECIDE TO ASK HELP OF THE BLIND

As we drew near the house, we caught sight of a man walking bent over along the path to the cliff. He had a magnifying glass in his hand, and every few steps he stooped and squinted through it at the ground; then he took a tape measure from his pocket, and measured the distance between the places he had been scrutinising; after which he entered the result of his observations in a small notebook.

He was so busy doing this that he did not notice us till we were close to him. Then he straightened up, smiled, and called out cheerily:

“Good-afternoon, gentlemen. Lovely weather we’re having.”

He was a short, stockily built man, or rather boy—for he could hardly have been over twenty-two years old—with a shock of bright red hair and twinkling blue eyes. I knew at once that he must be a reporter.

“Mr. Keaton and Mr. Scarsden, I suppose?” he said.

We nodded.

"I'm glad to meet you." He extended a hand to each of us. "My name's Cassidy. I'm from the 'Daily News.' Our local man, Blodgett of the 'Clarion,' gave us the tip about Mr. Mears' death, and the City Editor sent me down to get the story."

I stifled a groan, and murmured something about being glad to see him. I had had some experience with reporters, and I knew what we were in for—flaring headlines in to-morrow's paper with faked pictures of Arthur and myself, of the paralytic man and Mrs. Bartlett, and photographs and diagrams of the place all marked with heavy black crosses, showing "where the body was found," "where the murder was committed," "how the murderer made his escape," etc., etc. If I could have annihilated Mr. Cassidy then and there, I would have done so gladly. Our only hope, I knew, was in convincing him that there was really nothing extraordinary about the affair, that David Mears' death was simply an accident. Then, possibly, we might escape with no more than a single-column "head," or even a dozen lines or so only on an inner page. His next remark, however, dispelled any such hopes.

"This really seems to be the goods," he said, smiling at us. "I was afraid when I started that it would turn out only another fake, but after I'd had a talk with Blodgett, I made up my mind right away

there'd been murder done. I didn't take any stock, of course, in what those rubes, Bicknell and Plummer, told me about its being an accident. People don't walk off cliffs in the dark, except in novels; and as for suicide—well, there're too many pleasanter ways of killing yourself."

"I'm afraid you'll have a hard time proving it," I said. "I had a notion at first that it might have been a murder, but I soon saw I was mistaken."

Arthur looked at me in surprise, and Cassidy smiled again.

"I don't know about that," he rejoined. "It doesn't look to me as though it would be so very hard to prove. While I was waiting for you to come back, I've been having a look around. These footprints——"

"I shouldn't think you'd need a magnifying glass to see them," I interrupted. "They're certainly clear enough."

"Ever read Conan Doyle's stories?" he asked me.

"It takes more than a high-power lens and a tape measure to make a Sherlock Holmes," I observed drily.

He reddened.

"I suppose you've made some startling discoveries with them," I went on in a tone which I tried to make still more sarcastic.

"I've found out a couple of things," he replied. "One is that Mr. Mears didn't make these footprints."

"Didn't make them!" Arthur exclaimed. "How do you know that?"

"Easy as rolling off a log. He didn't weigh enough. I'm not any lighter than he was, I guess, from what Plummer told me, and I've got small feet, too. It's my one beauty." He chuckled. "And my foot, you notice, doesn't make nearly so deep a mark as that." He pointed to the impress of David Mears' shoe in the mud beside his own.

"Sure about that?" I asked, wondering why we hadn't noticed it.

"Take a look at 'em," he replied, offering me the magnifying glass with a grin. It was true: the mark of his shoe was only half as deep. I remembered suddenly that it had been raining the night before, and I smiled as I handed him back the glass.

"Unfortunately for the accuracy of your deductions, or whatever you call them," I remarked, "it had just stopped raining, and the ground was considerably softer when these footprints were made than it is now. That accounts for their greater depth, I'm afraid."

He shook his head.

"I thought of that, but the difference is too big;

it wouldn't be nearly so great. Besides there's something else which proves he never made them—they're too far apart. These tracks were made by a tall man, a man over six feet, I should say, and he wasn't more than five foot nine, I understand."

I suggested that David Mears might have had an unusually long stride for a man of his height.

"Supposing he had," he said, "it seems to me he'd have walked slowly, if he were just getting over a fainting fit, and the marks of his feet would have been closer together than usual. Isn't that so, Mr. Keaton?"

Arthur agreed with him.

"What's your theory, then?" I asked—"that the murderer put on Mr. Mears' shoes?"

"It's the only possible explanation."

"But what'd he do after he'd thrown the body over?" Arthur asked. "There aren't, or rather there weren't, any other footprints when we looked this morning, not a sign of one."

"Of course not," Cassidy answered rather impatiently. "He wasn't ass enough for that. Either he took off Mr. Mears' shoes at the edge of the cliff and crawled away on his hands and knees till he got rock under him, or——"

"Your theory is all very fine, so far as it goes, Mr. Cassidy," I broke in; "but there are a few little matters which you seem to have overlooked—the

absence of any tell-tale marks on the body, for instance. How do you account for that?"

"He must have been killed by a blow on the head," he replied, "in the exact place he struck on when he was thrown from the cliff."

"Rather a strange coincidence, eh," I suggested.

"The chances would be at least even of his doing so."

"But why did the murderer go to the trouble of carrying him out of the house and pitching him over the cliff?" Arthur persisted.

Cassidy looked at him rather pityingly.

"He wanted it to appear an accident, of course, so as to avoid suspicion."

"And he was hiding somewhere in the library or the dining-room when I opened the door and looked in?" I asked.

He nodded.

"Then," I rejoined triumphantly, "there couldn't be the slightest object in his doing what you say he did; for he couldn't have hoped to fool anyone into thinking it an accident. He knew I had seen Mr. Mears lying there dead."

I never saw anyone more crestfallen for a moment. Then an obstinate look came over his face.

"It seems all foolishness, I admit," he said slowly; "but he did it just the same. Those footprints prove it."

"They prove nothing at all," I retorted, "except the fact that even the most approved Sherlock Holmes methods aren't always infallible. As I remarked before, Mr. Cassidy, it takes more than a magnifying glass and a tape measure to make a crack detective."

He winced a trifle at my irony, but I could see that he wasn't satisfied yet that he was mistaken.

"He'd better come indoors and see if he can find any traces of the murderer there, eh, Arthur?" I went on. "We want you to be quite satisfied that it was nothing but an accident, you understand, Mr. Cassidy." And I led the way into the house.

"If you'll let me use the phone a minute," he said, "I'd like to send in a little something for the ten o'clock edition."

"You'll have to go to the village to do that," Arthur told him. "We haven't a phone."

"No use, then," he returned cheerfully: "couldn't possibly make it in time. It doesn't matter so long as none of the other papers get wise."

He spent more than half an hour pottering about the library and the dining-room, most of the time on his knees with the magnifying glass in one hand and a pocket flashlight in the other; but if he found anything of interest, he kept it to himself. He had, however, the average newspaper man's curiosity and lack of scruples in attempting to gratify it; but there

was something about his manner which took the edge off his impertinence, and made it in fact rather amusing than otherwise. We evaded or refused to answer a good many of his questions, of course—Arthur by this time understood my object in disavowing my belief that his uncle had been murdered—and so Mr. Cassidy got very little satisfaction out of us. He felt rather hurt, I think, at our evident lack of trust in him; for on taking leave of us he said:

“Well, gentlemen, I’m much obliged for what you’ve been good enough to tell me. Sorry you don’t feel like loosening up more, for I’d like to help you clear this thing up. It’s a mighty interesting case. Shouldn’t wonder if I’d see you again soon. So long.”

“Hang it all!” I said to Arthur when Cassidy had gone, “I’m afraid our red-haired young friend means mischief. He’s bound to make a murder mystery out of it, I guess, in spite of everything; and then we’ll have half a dozen of his confounded tribe down on us to-morrow morning. Perhaps we’d have done better to have taken him into our confidence, and made him promise not to print anything till we gave him permission.”

He asked me if I thought there was anything in Cassidy’s notion about the footprints.

“The boy’s quite right about them, I’m sure,” I answered. “I wonder we hadn’t sense enough to no-

tice it ourselves. He's proved for us that David Mears didn't walk out of this house alive last night—I knew I couldn't be mistaken about that; but we're as far as ever from knowing who murdered him, and why he, or they—for it doesn't look like a one-man job to me—threw his body over the cliff. I tell you what," I cried, struck with a sudden thought, "we'll get Stephen Garth down here, and let him try his hand at straightening this thing out."

Arthur looked at me in amazement.

"That sociologist friend of yours?" he said. "I didn't know he was a detective. Besides, I thought you told me he went stone blind a couple of years ago?"

"So he did," I replied, "but for all that I'll bet you he'll be able to see twice as far into this mess as you or I can. It's brains, real detective brains, we want, not eyes alone; and that's what you and I seem to be shy on—the enterprising Mr. Cassidy has shown us that. We need someone to do the heavy thinking for us, and Garth is just the chap. He can sit still and tell us what to look for. It'll be up to us to find it."

"We certainly need someone to help us," Arthur agreed; "but it seems a queer thing to ask a blind man to run down a murderer."

"It's not according to Hoyle, I know," I said, "but never mind that. Blind as he is, Garth can

give the ordinary smart Aleck of a detective cards and spades, and beat him a mile. I know of several cases in which he's done it. They weren't murder cases, to be sure—he hates newspaper notoriety too much, I imagine, to get mixed up in anything of that kind; but they had two of the best private agencies going south just the same, and it didn't take him twenty-four hours to do the trick.

And I went on to tell him how Garth had got back the gold paper-cutter that Lafayette had given Mrs. Jack Keith's great-grandmother, and of his success in finding old Peter Farnsworthy's will.

"In both cases," I said, "the detective bureaus sent their best men, and they insisted that the only way to recover the paper-knife was to put all the servants through the third degree, and if that failed, to institute a secret search for it in the houses of Mrs. Keith's guests—she had missed the paper-cutter at the close of a small bridge party, and was sure one of the women had taken it. Garth suggested that she send each of the women a book, ostensibly to get her opinion of it, and then a note, saying she had missed the paper-cutter and thought she might possibly have left it in the book. A few hours later one of the women called her up on the phone and said she had found it. Garth guessed that she would be only too glad to return it, if she were given a chance to do so in such a way as to avoid, apparently, all

suspicion of her having stolen it. He knew that such a woman often acts on an impulse which she regrets as soon as she has had time to think it over; and that all he had to do was to smooth the way for her.

"In the case of the Farnsworthy will," I explained, "it took more than a shrewd knowledge of human nature. Garth had to possess the knack of putting himself mentally into old Peter Farnsworthy's place. If he hadn't been able to do this, he could never have hit upon such an unlikely hiding-place for the will as a bored-out hammer handle, except by the merest accident."

"I grant you that," Arthur admitted, "but there's quit a difference between finding a stolen paper-knife or a missing will and solving a mystery of this kind; besides, I thought you said he wouldn't care to get mixed up in anything so sensational as a murder case?"

"He'd be willing to make an exception for us, I guess," I told him, "especially as this isn't supposed to be one. Cassidy may not try to make it out a murder after all; and even if he does, we know what the coroner's verdict will be. That ought to have some weight with the other papers. I'm still hoping," I added, "that we can go ahead without being pestered by a lot of fool reporters and wooden-headed police agents,"

Arthur was still rather sceptical, I could see, regarding Garth's detective ability; but he made no objection to my going to the village after dinner that night and wiring him at Bar Harbor to join us immediately, if he could.

"And now," I said, "let's have a look for that newspaper."

CHAPTER VI

A FACE AT THE WINDOW

It had begun to grow dark in the library, and we lighted the big lamp that hung from an oak rafter in the centre of the ceiling and a smaller lamp on the table at the farther side of the room near David Mears' desk. The desk itself was a big roll-top one of quartered oak. The lid was down but unlocked, and we rolled it up and began our search.

There were a great many papers and documents in the desk, all carefully and methodically arranged. We came upon bundles and bundles of receipted bills neatly tied with tape and marked in red ink, a file of stock-market reports, some gaudy mining prospectuses, several packages of letters sealed and labelled "Private Correspondence," a portfolio full of maps and blue-prints showing unclaimed Government land in various Western States, stacks of newspaper clippings yellow with age, and much miscellaneous matter—writing paper, envelopes, blotters, rubber bands, and stamps; but no sign of the newspaper we were after.

"Guess he must have burned it," I said, after we

had ransacked the last drawer and cubby-hole. "It isn't here, that's certain, unless he cut the article out and filed it away with these other clippings. Perhaps we'd better see." And I began to unfasten the string around them.

We were busily engaged in running through the packet when a slight noise made us look around. Margaret Ellis stood in the doorway, her slender figure scarcely distinguishable against the blackness of the unlighted hall.

"Margy!" Arthur exclaimed—and in that single word joy, surprise, enquiry, and anxiety were curiously blended.

She came swiftly toward us, and as the light fell upon her face I saw that she was struggling with some strong emotion.

"What are you doing?" she demanded hurriedly. "What right have you to touch his things?"

"If you will sit down——" Arthur began.

"I shall *not* sit down," she broke in excitedly, "until you answer me."

"Very well," he said quietly. "We were looking for a paper."

"His will, you mean," she went on. "I should think you might at least have waited till he was buried."

Arthur flushed at the scorn in her voice.

"You are mistaken," he replied in rather a hurt tone. "We were looking for a newspaper."

"A newspaper!" she repeated.

He nodded.

"We thought it might help us find who killed him," I put in.

"Killed him!" she cried, a sudden horror in her eyes. "Why, what do you mean? I thought it was an accident—the station-master told me so. He said you found him lying dead on the beach, that he had fallen over the cliff, and"—her voice shook. "It's too horrible!" she broke off. "I can't believe it. It isn't true; I know it isn't true."

Arthur made her sit down, and we told her everything, or nearly everything; for by tacit agreement we said nothing of David Mears' cruelty to his brother—there was no need to hurt her by speaking of that. But we could not very well avoid telling her of the scene in the library when Arthur had found his uncle unconscious in his chair, the newspaper we were hunting for at his feet, and of his wild outburst of rage when Arthur had stooped to pick the paper up; for it explained why she had found us rifling his desk.

She could not or would not believe, however, that David Mears had had an enemy on earth, and we soon gave up trying to convince her that he had been dreading an attempt on his life.

"It's all nonsense," she declared. "He would have told me about it: he always told me everything."

There seemed little use in saying anything more after that. In her eyes, we knew, he had been all that a man should be; and to try to shake her faith in him, to tear the veil from her eyes so that she should see him in a new and terrible light was something neither of us cared to do. I recalled what I had said to Jonathan Mears—the man was dead, and whatever wrong he'd done he'd paid for. What good could it do to blacken his memory in the mind of the one being who had loved and admired him?

Arthur must have taken the same view of it as I did; for he admitted that very likely we were mistaken in thinking that revenge might have been the motive for the crime.

"It's quite possible," he told her, "that his apparent dread of someone was mostly my imagination, or it may have been a delusion of his own that somebody had designs against him."

"That was it, of course," she agreed. "He couldn't actually have been afraid of anyone. That's a ridiculous idea! It's awful enough as it is. Promise me," she went on very earnestly, "that you won't go on looking among his things. I can't bear to have you. It seems dishonourable somehow, almost like—like desecrating his grave."

In response to her appeal he got up, and pulling down the lid of the desk, he locked it, and handed her the key. She took it with such a sigh of relief

that I couldn't help wondering if after all she might not know more of David Mears' private affairs than she wished us to suppose. I had always thought her candour itself; but women, even the youngest of them, are born actresses, and it was not impossible, I thought, that her anxiety to put an end to our search was due to something besides distress at having us lay inquisitive hands on his belongings. Was she not afraid of what we might find?—afraid that we might unearth some terrible secret which he had confided to her?

I covertly studied her face while she was explaining to Arthur how she happened to get back so much sooner than we had expected—for she must have started at least an hour before the telegram he had sent could have reached her. It seems she had waked up that morning with a curious feeling of uneasiness and dread which she couldn't shake off, and which finally drove her into cutting short her visit at the Duncans and taking the noon train to Shelburne. So sure was she that something tragic had happened that she received the news of David Mears' death with a calmness which quite shocked her informant, the old station-master.

But closely as I looked for some tell-tale sign to confirm my suspicions, I found nothing. Her face was as frank and guileless as a child's. She was in fact scarcely more than a child anyway, despite her

nineteen years. I felt suddenly ashamed of my doubts: they seemed base and unworthy. I wished, though, that Arthur had not given her the key to the desk; for I felt sure that there must be papers in it which would throw light on David Mears' past, and aid us in solving the riddle of his death.

As I listened half-absently to their talk, my eyes kept returning to the desk, and annoyance at Arthur's foolish compliance with the girl's request grew in me. Why could he not have made her understand how important it was for us to secure every scrap of information that might possibly aid us in tracking the murderer? Why had he not the courage and good sense to refuse her wish? What folly it was for him to put such an obstacle in the way of our success merely to gratify the whim of an over-sensitive, overwrought girl. It was quite like him, I reflected, to sacrifice everything to his abnormal sense of honour, though in this particular instance I suspected that it was quite a different motive which had prompted him to yield so readily to her desire. If we were to be hampered and thwarted in our task by having first to get her sanction to everything we proposed doing, we might as well abandon our efforts then and there. I at any rate had promised to do nothing so absurd. If Arthur should refuse to help me, I would take matters into my own hands. I would even break open the desk itself, if necessary, and rob it of its

secrets. What harm could it do the dead man? There would be no call for me to blazon abroad the result of my discoveries. All I wanted was some clue to guide me in finding the guilty man. Surely the demands of right and justice would be better served so than by a morbid reluctance to pry among his papers through fear of bringing ugly facts to light.

I was roused from these reflections by Margaret rising.

"As soon as I've changed my things," she said, "I'll get dinner for you."

"We'll help you," said Arthur, "if you'll let us. Mrs. Bartlett isn't up to much yet, I'm afraid."

I was about to second his offer when I saw a man staring in at us from the window opposite me. I had a fleeting glimpse of a thin, sallow face, an ugly, drooping mouth, and two pale, red-lidded eyes under a crushed-down grey felt hat. The next instant he had gone. Fortunately neither Arthur nor the girl was looking at me, and with a sharp effort I mastered the impulse to cry out and run to the window. I could not, however, recover instantly from my astonishment, and I saw from the surprised look Arthur gave me that he had noticed it.

"What is it?" he said as soon as Margaret had left. "What's the matter? You look as if you'd seen a ghost."

I did not stop to explain: I made a dash for the door. In another instant I was out of the house, and running toward the library window. But any hopes that I had of capturing the man in the grey felt hat were soon gone. The moment's delay while I was waiting for Margaret to leave the room had given him time to escape. Besides, it was absolutely dark. He had only to run a few yards to be quite safe from discovery. I pictured him chuckling to himself at my futile efforts to find him. It made me furious. At length, out of breath and angry, I gave up the search and went back.

Arthur was waiting for me at the door.

"What in thunder have you been up to?" he demanded.

"Chasing butterflies," I said crossly.

"Two-legged ones?"

I nodded.

"Thought you must have seen one at the window by the way you acted. What did he look like?"

"He had a pasty face, rabbit-coloured eyes, and a grey felt hat on."

"It couldn't have been Randall, then," he said.

"Of course it wasn't Randall," I snapped. "Why should he come snooping round like that? He isn't a peeping Tom, is he?"

"Not that I know of, but I don't see who else——"

"Some drunken hobo, probably," I cut in, "with a taste for rubbering. I'd have taught him to come flattening his dirty nose against people's window-panes, if I'd caught him."

He shook his head.

"They never bother us. We're too far from the railroad."

"Perhaps it is one of the servants you engaged, then. They ought to be arriving soon, hadn't they?"

"Yes, but the man I hired as coachman was a chunky, red-faced chap."

"Well, I give it up," I said, "unless—he's some old friend of David Mears."

Arthur gave a start.

"The man he was afraid of, you mean?"

"There may have been more than one of them," I replied soberly.

"But he would have heard of his death," he objected.

"Not necessarily," I said, "and if he had, he may be after something your uncle possessed, a letter or a deed perhaps."—I glanced significantly at the locked desk. "If we only knew what that contained," I added, "we might be able to tell."

He bit his lip.

"You think I'm a fool to have given her the key to it! Very likely I am—from your point of view."

You don't know what it means to me to——" He broke off, and stood staring moodily at the floor.

"I think you did a very silly thing," I said, "but I understand perfectly why you did it: you're in love with her."

"What if I am?" he demanded.

"Nothing," I returned drily. "It's none of my business, of course; only I tell you plainly that if you're going to let your feelings get the better of your judgment, you might as well give up any idea of helping find out who's responsible for your uncle's death. You can't play the lover and the detective at the same time you know: it won't work, not in this case anyway."

"If you mean by that I've got to hoodwink and deceive her, I wash my hands of the whole business right now," he replied angrily. "I won't play the liar and the hypocrite for the sake of hanging a dozen murderers."

"Suit yourself," I said shortly. "If you're afraid of offending her by trying to get to the bottom of this business, it's your own affair. Thank Heaven, I haven't got any such ridiculous scruples."

He started to reply; then changed his mind, and left the room without a word.

To say that I was thoroughly disgusted would be to put it very mildly indeed. For a while I was minded to quit the place, take the next train back

to New York, and leave the mystery of David Mears' death to solve itself or remain unsolved. What business was it of mine anyway? The dead man was nothing to me. I had never cared for him in the least; in fact I had heartily disliked him. Why, then, should I put myself out to find his murderer and avenge his death? Clearly the sensible thing for me to do was to leave. And yet I could not make up my mind to do so. I was under the spell of that peculiar fascination which a mysterious crime exercises on nearly everyone connected with it; and I knew as I sat there frowning at the spot where I had seen the murdered man lying that I should not be able to shake off that morbid fascination. I knew that no matter how far away I went, it would continue to haunt me, that I should speculate over it by day and dream of it by night, that it would take possession of my thoughts to the exclusion of all else. And realising this, I gave up the idea of leaving Mears House. Even had I known what further tragedies were to be enacted there, and in what peril I should soon find myself, my decision, I believe, would have been the same.

CHAPTER VII

I STUMBLE UPON A CLUE

DINNER that night was a rather doleful affair. It was after eight o'clock when we sat down to it, and I, for one, was nearly famished. It could hardly be said that Margaret shone as a cook. The soup was not so bad—too little salt is a fault more easily remedied than too much; but if there is anything less edible than half-boiled fowl, I have yet to taste it. By some miracle the potatoes were thoroughly fried: otherwise we should have had to subsist mainly on crackers and canned peaches and extremely weak tea.

Nor was there what could be properly termed any flow of soul among us to make up for the lack of palatable food. Margaret spoke hardly a word. Between Arthur and myself was the constraint of our recent quarrel, which made it difficult for us to talk; and like a spectre at the foot of the table, restraining us from speech, stood David Mears' empty chair.

I am sure we were all glad when the meal was over. As Margaret and Arthur declined my help in washing the dishes, I sat down again when they had

gone and lighted a cigar—more to propitiate my defrauded stomach than as the usual soothing adjunct to digestion. As I smoked, my gaze travelled idly about the room till it rested upon the big brass candlestick smeared with melted tallow which we had found that morning on the dining-table.

“If I were only another Sherlock Holmes now,” I thought, “I should be able to reconstruct the entire tragedy from that candlestick, supposing of course the murderer used it. An intelligent smell of the wick would tell me what particular brand of matches he used to light it, and it would only be necessary to visit the one dealer who kept them and get from him a photograph of the man, or a sufficiently accurate description of him, to make his arrest a matter of only trifling difficulty.” I chuckled at the absurdity of the notion. It seemed, however, hardly more far-fetched and ridiculous than some of the great detective’s marvellous exploits, which millions of readers have found plausible enough, I daresay, though I was never one of them.

Yielding to a sudden whim, I took down the candlestick from the mantelpiece.

“I should at least be able to deduce a few simple facts from a really scientific examination of it,” I argued facetiously—“whether the criminal was right- or left-handed, for instance, or wore ready-made clothes, or if he was suffering from rheumatism or

the whooping-cough. It must be all here somewhere."

I proceeded gravely to smell of the wick. It had a decidedly burnt odour, due very likely, I imagined, to its having been lighted. It humiliated me, however, to be unable to decide how it had been lighted. I could not for the life of me make out whether the murderer had used wax vestas, safety-matches, ordinary parlour-matches, or those infernal things tipped with sulphur commonly known as "hell-sticks." He might even have lighted it with one of those self-igniting platinum-wire and alcohol devices, or with flint and steel, or by rubbing two sticks together, for all I could tell.

I began to feel discouraged. Doubtless there were imprints of his fingers as thick as flies and as plain as billboards all over the candlestick itself, if I could only find them. He would at any rate have left the damning mark of his thumb somewhere upon its shining surface: they were always considerate enough to do that—in the detective stories. It was part of the game. But again I was doomed to disappointment. We must have blurred the impressions through our inconceivable stupidity in touching the thing at all. We should have known enough, I reflected, to have left it alone till we had a chance to study it through a high-powered telescope.

In despair I was about to put it back on the mantel-

piece when with a chuckle of amusement at the unpardonable slovenliness of my methods, I realised that I was actually on the point of abandoning my efforts without removing the great blob of hardened grease on the base of the candlestick. Underneath that wax-like covering what might not be hidden—perhaps the name and address of the murderer neatly engraved? or a slip of paper with his telephone number on it? or a United States Cigar Store certificate? or the gold filling from one of his front teeth?

Smiling as I thought of how chagrined Cassidy would be at having overlooked so promising a clue, I opened my penknife and began whittling away at that precious chunk of tallow. Firmly determined to be guilty of no further blunders, I whittled as slowly, as methodically, as scientifically as possible. I scrutinised each shaving with the minutest care, debating in my mind the expediency of having it analysed later by a chemist on the chance of its containing some faint, identifying aroma of tobacco, chewing-gum, or whiskey.

"Nobody," I thought gleefully, as I removed the last coating of grease, "can say that I have let any clue escape me this time through a reckless impatience. I defy anyone to have done the work more thoroughly." And I threw a proud glance at the heap of tissue-thin parings on the table beside me.

"And to think," I murmured sadly, holding the

candlestick upside-down in front of me and slowly revolving it, "that all my labour should be for—nothing," I was about to add; but instead I sat staring silently at a bright crimson stain along the outer edge of the base!

Jumping up, I held the candlestick nearer the light and examined the sinister-looking blot more closely. It looked exactly like blood; but to make sure I snatched out my scarf-pin, pricked my finger with it, squeezed out a few drops of blood, and smeared them upon the base of the candlestick. They dried almost instantly, making exactly the same sort of stain. I had no longer any doubt that I had found the object with which David Mears was murdered.

My first feeling was one of exultant satisfaction, mixed with an unwarranted sense of pride in my achievement; but it was soon followed by the sobering reflection that I was still a long way from learning who had used that singular weapon in such deadly fashion. My idea that David Mears had been the victim of someone bent on revenge seemed less likely in the light of this discovery. Anyone intent on murder, I thought, would have come provided with a revolver, a knife, or some other arm: he would not have depended on a casual weapon such as a candlestick. Its use showed clearly enough that the act was unpremeditated—that of a man suddenly and unexpectedly called upon to defend himself from as-

sault, or forced to choose hurriedly between violence or certain detection.

"A burglar! That's who it was!" I cried half-aloud. "What a fool I was not to think of it before." Coincidentally there flashed into my mind the recollection of the man who had passed me in the buggy the night before. "No wonder he was in such a hurry!" I exclaimed. "That explains it."

"Explains what?" asked Arthur, who had entered the room without my hearing him.

"Close the door and I'll tell you," I said, all thought of our recent quarrel gone from my mind.

"There's no need of that," he replied shortly. "She's gone upstairs."

"So much the better," I said. "There's no use in her knowing anything about it: it would only make her feel worse." And somewhat theatrically, I'm afraid, I took up the candlestick and held it out to him.

"Look at that!" I cried triumphantly, pointing to the crimson stain along the edge.

"Blood?" he exclaimed.

"Yes," I said. "That explains how he was killed, and if I'm not much mistaken, I know who killed him." And I told him how I had happened to find the bloodstain, and my grounds for thinking that the man in the buggy was the murderer. "I may be all

wrong, of course," I added, "but it's a clue worth following up at any rate, don't you think so?"

He was so long in replying that I repeated my question impatiently.

"You may be right in thinking he was killed by a burglar," he said; "but I don't very well see how it could have been the man who passed you in the buggy. He wouldn't have been very likely, it seems to me, to have run off before he finished the job."

"Finished the job? What do you mean by that?"

"Someone must have thrown the body over the cliff, you know."

My face fell. I saw the solution of the mystery which I had so jubilantly effected dissolving before my eyes. The only thing I could think of to save it was an accomplice in the crime; but though I suggested this, I realised as I did so how weak an explanation it was.

"He wouldn't have been apt to skip off and leave the other fellow to get rid of the body," Arthur objected. "Besides, it isn't very likely that the other man, if there was one, would have risked getting caught and taken for the murderer. And why, as you yourself pointed out to Cassidy, should anyone go to the trouble of carrying him out and pitching him over the cliff when he knew you had seen him lying dead in the library? I don't see either how the body happened to be in the library, if your theory

about the burglar's being surprised by him in here is correct. Why on earth should he go to all the bother of dragging him in there? What object could he have had——"

"Oh, shut up!" I said with a rather sickly grin at my own discomfiture. "There's no need of rubbing it in. You're right. So far as holding water goes, my theory has any sieve I ever heard of beaten a mile. It would make an ash-sifter look like a sheet-iron bucket, I see that. Just the same," I continued, "I'll bet you anything you like that's David Mears' blood there on the candlestick. Someone killed him with it somehow, I feel sure of that."

"I shouldn't wonder if that's so," he began, "but——"

"Damn your 'buts,'" I broke in cheerfully. "I admit that I haven't brains enough to make head or tail of it. All the more reason we should get someone who has. I'm going straight down to the village, and send that wire to Garth." And I got up.

But I had hardly done so when the doorbell rang. We went together to answer it. A lout of a farmer's boy stood there, holding a yellow envelope in his hand.

"Telegram for Mr. Jon'than Mears," he blurted out. "There's fifty cents charges on it."

Arthur took the envelope and was about to pay him.

"Hold on a minute," I said. "I'll get him to take

my wire to Garth." And I went into the library to write it while Arthur took the message upstairs to the paralytic man.

He came down just as I was handing the boy my note, and impressing upon him the importance of its being sent immediately by giving him a quarter extra. Jonathan Mears' telegram, Arthur informed me, was from Randall, and read:

"Lost oars. Picked up by lumber schooner. Back to-morrow morning."

"Well, there's one mystery, at least, accounted for," I remarked as we locked the door and put out the lights. "The fool must have drifted out to sea, I suppose. Lucky he didn't capsize. It'll be some time, I guess, before Jonathan Mears lets him go fishing again. What'd he say when he read the telegram?"

"'If a man's born to be hanged, you can't drown him,'" Arthur answered.

I chuckled. It was precisely the sort of remark I should have expected the paralytic man to make.

CHAPTER VIII

THE MAN IN THE GREY FELT HAT

THE room I had always occupied at Mears House was the larger of the two guest-chambers, the one marked "Stephen Garth" on the floor-plan; but as that room was in process of cleaning when the servants left, I was given the adjoining one over the front hall next to David Mears' room.

Whether having his dead body so near me wore on my nerves, or whether it was simply because, like many people, I find it hard to go to sleep in a strange bed, I tossed about for what seemed hours. Finally I got up, put on my bathrobe and slippers, and began to read. As a rule, this serves to make me drowsy in no time; but half an hour later I was wider awake than ever. In desperation I threw down my book, a stupid treatise on International Banking Laws, and started to take some simple physical-culture exercises in hopes that they might drive my insomnia away; but the only result was to make me feel hungry.

"That's what's the matter with me," I thought; "I'm starving. Of course I couldn't sleep." I groaned, remembering the half-raw chicken we had

had for dinner. There were, I knew, some tins of tongue and devilled ham on the pantry shelves, and one of these with a few crackers would serve at least to take the edge off my hunger and perhaps bring me sleep. It was a scheme worth trying, I decided; so I lighted the bedside candle, and holding it in one hand and shielding its flickering flame with the other, I crossed the hall and stole quietly down the front stairs.

I was reminded as I did so of Christmas Eves long ago when even more lightly clad I had crept stealthily down the long flight of stairs at home, my heart beating fast with excitement and hope, to take a peep at the long line of stockings hanging from the mantelpiece. I found myself contrasting also my present nocturnal venture with that of the night before when I had left the paralytic man on the grim errand of carrying up David Mears' lifeless body, and of the disquieting doubts and fears which had then assailed me. My worst dread now was of finding the pantry cupboard locked; in which case I resolved to break it open rather than return to face another period of hungry wakefulness.

The cupboard was not locked, however, and it did not take me long to secure a tin of devilled ham and a handful of soda biscuit; but finding a can-opener was not such an easy matter. I hunted high and low for one in vain. My penknife would have done, but I had left it upstairs in my trousers pocket; so

there was nothing to do but take my booty back with me to my room and eat it there.

I had just put the can of ham and the crackers in my pocket, and was picking up the candle when I heard a noise at the dining-room window. I thought at first that I must be mistaken; but an immediate repetition of the sound, followed by a sharp click as though the lock were being tampered with, settled the matter. Someone was trying to break into the house!

I cannot say that the realisation of this startled me as it would ordinarily have done. The events of the past twenty-four hours had probably deadened my susceptibilities. I had had too many shocks to respond very readily to a new one, no matter how surprising. My first feeling, indeed, was one of irritation at being interrupted in my preparation for a spread; but the next instant I had forgotten this annoyance, real as it was; for I heard the French window creak slightly on its hinges, and then the soft tread of a man's foot on the dining-room floor.

At the first warning creak of the window I had blown out the candle; and I stood now in the close darkness of the long, narrow pantry, wondering if the intruder were aware of my presence, and if so, what he would be likely to do about it—"Come and shoot me, I suppose," I thought.

Evidently he had not seen the light of my candle,

however, or else he was not of a bloodthirsty nature; for he did not come near me. On the contrary, he appeared to be standing perfectly still; for I could catch no further sound of him. While I waited with growing impatience for him to stir, I tried to make up my mind what I should do. It would be absolute folly, I realised, for me to confront him—armed as of course he was—and ask him what he meant by disturbing a gentleman intent upon a midnight gorge. He would doubtless reply by shooting me full of holes, which would mitigate my emptiness, to be sure, but not in the exact way I desired. I concluded that the best thing to do would be to stand perfectly still until he either took his departure with as much of the family plate as he cared for, or went into the library or the front hall; in which latter case I might be able to make my way out through the back part of the house and up the back stairs to my room without his hearing me. Then I could get my revolver and meet him, presumably, upon more equal terms.

“Never again while I’m in this house,” I vowed, “will I so much as venture into the bathroom without a gun. It’s tempting Providence.”

Having satisfied himself, apparently, that no one had heard him enter, the man in the next room began to move quietly about. I had left the pantry door slightly ajar, and through this crack came occasional

swift gleams of light which seemed to show that he was using an electric torch. I thought that I might be able to creep noiselessly to the door and catch a glimpse of him by one of these furtive illuminations; but before I could make the attempt, I heard him go into the library, and I lost no time in stealing out through the store-room and the kitchen into the back hall, feeling my way cautiously step by step.

At the top of the back stairs I was unlucky enough to tread on a loose board. It creaked appallingly; and a second later I heard Mrs. Bartlett get heavily out of bed, preparatory, I knew, to investigating the nature of the disturbance. While I was hurriedly debating whether to await her coming or make a discreet dash for my room, she flung open the door and confronted me. I had never seen her before in *négligée* attire—her hair in curl-papers and minus her false teeth—and the sight made me gasp. It would, I am sure, have awed the boldest. Her size—she was at least five feet ten inches tall and strong as a man—and her majesty of demeanour quite made up, however, for any trifling deficiencies of toilet.

“Well?” she demanded in the tone of one who bids you say your prayers before taking revenge upon you for some mortal injury.

“I’m awfully sorry to have disturbed you, Mrs. Bartlett,” I stammered, “but you see I was hungry, really frightfully hungry——” I stopped, aware

from her expression that my explanation left something to be desired.

"Well?" she repeated.

"And so I—I went downstairs to get something to eat," I added, pulling out the tin of devilled ham and the crackers as mute witnesses of my veracity. Her frown deepened as she saw them. I remembered that she didn't approve of midnight lunches, and I shoved them hastily back in my pocket.

"Well?" she said again, and I thought I detected a growing impatience in her voice.

"Well, I got them, you see," I remarked inanely. "I—I was just taking them back to my room. I came up the back way so—so as not to wake anybody."

"I see," she said, surveying me from head to foot with blighting scorn. The next instant she had slammed the door in my face. I drew a long breath and fled.

I had lost, however, several precious minutes, which the burglar had undoubtedly made good use of, I reflected, as I hunted for my revolver. By this time he had probably got together his spoil and gone, or he might be that very instant climbing the stairs intent on further depredations. I considered waking Arthur; but I decided not to. I should only lose more valuable time doing so, and I had lost quite enough as it was.

Clutching my revolver, I tiptoed carefully across the hall in the dark—I had thought best not to take the candle—and down the stairs to the landing, where I stopped and listened for fully half a minute without hearing a sound.

“Gone!” I said to myself, the thrill of my anticipated encounter suddenly leaving me. “Drat that old shrew!”—only I fear that in my disappointment I used a less polite word to designate Mrs. Bartlett. “That’s the second time to-day a woman has messed things up. They’re always doing it: confound ’em!”

Somewhat less cautiously I descended the remaining stairs, stopped a second to get my bearings in the opaque gloom of the hall, and then went straight to the library door. As I stretched out my hand to fumble for the knob, I caught the unmistakable sound of rustling paper within. An unexpected thunderclap could hardly have startled me more, so sure had I been that the burglar had gone.

In a flash I was peering through the keyhole. There at David Mears’ desk, dimly visible by the light of the electric torch which he held in his left hand, sat the man in the grey felt hat whom I had surprised that afternoon staring in the window. He had pried the lid of the desk open, and was examining a packet of letters. I wondered what he was after—some incriminating note he had written the dead man probably: at least I could think of no other

reason which would make him take such desperate risks.

For perhaps five minutes I crouched there, spying on him as he searched with feverish haste through the big heap of correspondence. Then with a sudden, avid gesture I saw him pounce upon one of the envelopes in the pile spread out before him and snatch the enclosure from it. It was evidently not what he had been hunting for, however; for he gave a low grunt of disappointment, and started to get up. It was time for me to act. I opened the door.

"Throw up your hands!" I cried, levelling my revolver at his head.

He obeyed me with surprising readiness—extinguishing the electric torch as he did so.

Too enraged at the trick he had played upon me to consider the consequences, I sprang blindly toward him, to be met with a crashing blow on the head which sent me reeling back against the wall. I pulled the trigger of the revolver as I fell.

The next thing I was aware of was a burning sensation in my throat. I opened my eyes to find Arthur bending over me with a flask. Beside him were Margaret and Mrs. Bartlett, eyeing me in evident anxiety and alarm. I felt flattered as well as puzzled at finding myself the object of so much consideration. Clearly I must have done something to

be the recipient of it, I thought, though I could not recall what it was.

"Feeling better?" Arthur asked.

I nodded.

"What's all the row about?" I enquired.

"Don't you remember?"

I shook my head.

"Have another swig of the brandy," he suggested, putting the flask to my lips.

I took a big swallow of it. It cleared my head in no time.

"Did he get away?" I asked. "Did I hit him?"

They looked doubtfully at one another.

"Well, why don't you answer?" I exclaimed peevishly. "You've got tongues in your heads, haven't you?"

"You mustn't excite yourself talking about it just now," said Margaret.

"Nonsense!" I cried. "I'm all right. I got a little knock on the head, that's all. It won't hurt me any to talk."

"If you're sure it won't tire you too much," Arthur said, "you might tell us what happened. We heard the shot and found you lying here unconscious."

"I was hungry," I began, carefully avoiding Mrs. Bartlett's eye, "and I went down into the pantry to get something to eat. I found a tin of devilled ham and some crackers, and was just starting back with

them when I heard someone trying to break in at the dining-room window." I paused to take breath.

"Well"—it was Margaret, not Mrs. Bartlett, who spoke—"what did you do?"

"Nothing. I just stood still and waited to see if he would get in or not."

"And when he did get in?" she asked eagerly.

"I still waited," I replied.

She looked a trifle disappointed. I wondered if she had expected me to dash in and leap at the man's throat.

"Presently he came in here," I continued, "and then I stole out through the kitchen and up the back stairs. I stepped on a loose board and waked up Mrs. Bartlett. I didn't want to scare her by saying anything about the burglar," I went on hurriedly—a sniff from her saying as plainly as words, 'Oh, the perfidy of man!'—"so I—er—merely told her I'd been down to get something to eat."

"Why didn't you wake me up?" Arthur asked.

"I did think of doing so," I said, "but I'd lost so much time already I was afraid the burglar would get away before I could rouse you; and then, too, I wanted to have the honour of capturing him all by myself. If I'd known how it was going to turn out," I added, after I had described my encounter with the fellow, "I'd have been only too glad to let you in on

it. Nabbing men in grey felt hats doesn't seem to be my strong point, I admit."

"It was awfully brave of you to go for him that way in the dark," Margaret said.—I had apparently atoned in her eyes for my earlier lack of courage.

"I'm glad you think so," I said, "but as a matter of fact it wasn't bravery at all, merely the sort of thing any brainless idiot might have been expected to do. I lost my head, that's all."

"You were lucky not to lose your life, too," put in Arthur. "If he'd struck a little harder——"

"I shouldn't feel so sore at having let him get the better of me," I interrupted.

"You came near hitting him anyway," he said. "Look at that." And he held out to me a grey felt hat with a bullet hole through the brim of it. I turned it over curiously. It was a cheap, badly worn hat, much stained and crumpled. Cut in stencil on the sweat-band were the letters "S. G."

"It's another clue at any rate," I remarked, trying to speak jestingly, though my head was aching furiously. "We have only——"

And then the room grew suddenly dark; there came a queer buzzing in my ears, and I lost consciousness.

CHAPTER IX

STEPHEN GARTH

"By the end of the week," said the doctor three days later, deftly inserting a clinical thermometer in my mouth as he spoke, "I think you may safely get up."

I glared at him and made futile efforts to speak. As a result of the blow I had received from the man in the grey felt hat, I had been down with a high fever from which I was just recovering.

"You must allow me to congratulate you on having made a remarkably quick convalescence, thanks to an unusually strong constitution and a very thick head—of hair," he added gravely, though I could see his eyes twinkle. "That blow you got would have given most men concussion of the brain."

I wondered if he meant to imply that I was lacking in the essential requisite for such a gift, or whether he merely intended to compliment me on the hardness of my skull.

"Just the same," he continued, making the most of my defenceless condition, "I shouldn't let it happen again if I were you. Better keep in mind what the Bible says about turning the other cheek." And

he chuckled as though he had said something funny. Then with exasperating slowness he leaned over and removed the thermometer.

"If you'd left that confounded thing in there another second," I said savagely, "I'd have thrown it at you, and if you think I'm going to lie here like a bed-ridden old woman till the end of the week, you've got another guess coming."

"Suit yourself," he returned cheerfully. "It'll be money in my pocket if you do get up sooner, so I ought not to object; but I feel it my professional duty to tell you that it will certainly bring on a relapse."

"Relapse fiddle-sticks!" I said. "I haven't any fever now, and I don't intend to have any more: neither do I intend to go on playing the helpless invalid forever. I've had enough of it."

"Suit yourself," he repeated, busy washing the thermometer and putting it back into its case. "If you won't obey orders, you mustn't blame me for what happens: I've given you fair warning." And with a cheerful "Good-bye, see you to-morrow," he went out.

No sooner had he gone than I crawled out of bed and staggered over to an easy-chair by the window. It was more of an effort than I had thought it would be. My head felt curiously light, and my legs seemed several sizes too small for me and very

wobbly. Still, I remained firm in my resolve to show Dr. Satterlee and the others that I was quite able to be up and about once more.

My eagerness to learn what had happened during the past three days—and in particular if Garth had hit upon any explanation of David Mears' death—demanded instant gratification. I had seen Garth for a moment only on his arrival, but the doctor had cut short my attempts to talk with him. In fact he had scarcely let me exchange a word with anyone. Arthur had been in to see me several times, but upon him, too, silence had evidently been enjoined; for he merely shook his head in reply to my questions. "You're worse than a Standard Oil magnate on the witness-stand," I told him. "Anyone would think from the way you all act that I was really sick and apt to die any moment, when as a matter of fact I'm feeling fine—fine, I tell you." But my looks must have given the lie to my words, I suppose; for he murmured something about my not getting excited, and left the room.

Now, however, that I had made up my mind to assert myself and put an end to Dr. Satterlee's absurd tyranny, I would ask as many questions as I liked and get answers to them, too, or know the reason why. And in accordance with this resolve, I picked up a small, old-fashioned dinner-bell that stood on the table beside me and rang it vigorously.

One of the new maids Arthur had engaged—a plain-featured Irish girl still in her teens, to judge from her lack of self-assurance as much as from her youthful appearance—answered the bell. I asked her to tell Garth that I would like to see him, and a moment later he came in.

At the time of his coming to Mears House Garth looked very much as he does to-day—a short, slight man of about my own age, well-built and energetic, but of a nervous rather than a muscular type of energy. He has grown a trifle stouter since, to be sure, but otherwise I can see little change in him. He was as bald then as he is now, and had the same trick of carrying his head a little to one side, as though the weight of it were too much for his neck to support. I have never seen a head more beautifully shaped than his, with a wide, high forehead, dark eyes far apart and rather prominent—it was hard to believe them blind—the nose and chin of an old Roman Emperor, and a somewhat small but finely modelled mouth.

His ears, however, were the most remarkable of his features—not that they were unusual in shape or size, but because they were so low as to appear almost misplaced, and on account of their extraordinary quality. I doubt if anyone was ever gifted with a more wonderful sense of hearing. Certainly I have never met anybody, even among those born blind,

who could distinguish and interpret sound with such unerring, almost uncanny skill. Without this power—which he had developed to an altogether incredible degree—he could never have achieved the results he did: he has told me so many times. The tiniest noises, unremarked or meaningless to most people, were packed with significance to him. Each registered its own distinct, unequivocal impression, producing an emotion or resulting in a co-ordination of ideas which often enabled him to arrive instantly at the most momentous conclusions.

Especially was this the case in regard to the tones, inflection, and timbre of the human voice. From these he was able to deduce an astonishingly large number of facts concerning the person speaking—such as his age, nationality, occupation, physical and mental state of health, disposition, and character. This, as I am well aware, may strike the reader as fanciful and even preposterous. It seemed so to me at first, and yet I learned later that to a lesser degree this power of divination was no uncommon thing among the blind, though I have heard of very few instances in which it proved so uniformly infallible.

I should not forget to mention as well a veritable sixth sense which he possessed—a sort of clairvoyance which made up in great measure for his lost sight. And yet clairvoyance is hardly the right word to

describe it. It was rather as if he had some strange invisible organ of sensibility, some occult medium, by means of which he became aware of things seemingly beyond his apprehension. Doubtless a psychologist could state it far more intelligibly: I can only repeat that he had some such way of sensitising himself, as it were, so as to receive impressions not communicable through the ordinary channels of the senses.

Just how much this faculty, combined with his marvellously developed hearing, has aided him in his work, it would be hard to say. Personally I think he overestimates its value to him, and underrates the part his brain has played in the mastering of these abstruse problems. Without a very high degree of mental acuteness, the clearest and soundest of reasoning powers, and what—for want of a better word—I must call a sympathetic imagination, his unusual psychical and auditory perceptions would, I feel sure, have been of little help to him. It is, in my opinion, far more to the brilliant qualities of his mind, his marked analytical and synthetical abilities, and his unrivalled skill as a constructive logician, that he chiefly owes his success.

At the time of David Mears' death I did not know Garth well; for though our acquaintance began during my first year at the Law School when he was taking a post-graduate course in sociology and economics, we never became really intimate, and since

graduation I had seen him only at rare intervals. On leaving Cambridge he had devoted himself wholly to a practical testing-out of certain theories he had formed regarding the effects of environment on character, and particularly in trying to determine what ratio poverty and its attendant circumstances of ugliness and squalor bore to crime. In common with a good many later investigators of the subject, he believed that statistics could be gathered to prove that in proportion as a human being is deprived of light, fresh air, proper food, and agreeable surroundings, his tendency toward crime directly increases; and that it could be demonstrated beyond question that by improving the vile, depressing, and unhygienic conditions amid which the poorer classes of any large community live, a vast saving could be effected in the present huge cost of maintaining medical, reformatory, and penal institutions, to say nothing of the incalculable gain that would thereby result in producing an immeasurably superior class of citizens.

The working out of this theory entailed upon him the necessity of living almost entirely among the lower elements of our population, and familiarising himself through actual experience with their ways of life. He had to spend his days in close, soul-deadening contact with the degraded, the vicious, and the criminal. He became, in short, one of the submerged

tenth, only emerging from this underworld at infrequent intervals when the need of intercourse with his own kind became unbearably insistent.

I happened to come across him during one of these periodic reappearances, and I remember how shocked I was at the change in him. He had lost altogether that light-hearted, boyish air which had always made him seem younger than his years in spite of his serious turn of mind. He had now the look of a man who has gone down into the depths and returned bearing upon him the marks of that hideous descent. The ghost of the old smile lighted up his face, however, when he saw me. He was—an unusual thing for him—in a conversational mood, and we spent the entire evening talking. He spoke of his work with that singular self-detachment which had always characterised him—as if he were a disinterested observer and chronicler of his own doings; and somehow they gained rather than lost in effectiveness on that account. I have never forgotten some of the things he told me in that quiet, unemotional voice of his—things too depressing, too harrowing almost for expression. I wondered how he could speak of them so calmly. It was, of course, partly because he had lost the sense of their dreadfulness through long familiarity with them; but it was due even more, I am sure, to the outward impassiveness of the man's nature. There was nothing of the passionate apostle

in him. A stranger might well have regarded him as some mere de-humanised personification of scientific zeal without love or sympathy for his fellow-beings, though such an estimate of him would be as far as possible from the truth.

I left him that night with mingled feelings of admiration and pity—admiration for his rare spirit of self-immolation, and pity touched with anger at the thought of his sacrificing his life and all his splendid gifts in what I could but regard as a vain and useless endeavour.

It was some months afterward that I read of his blindness—he had been helping a little lame boy in the slums set off some fireworks, and a Roman candle had exploded in his hand. The doctors thought he would lose the use of both eyes. I flung the paper down in anger at the injustice, the wanton cruelty of it; and went to see him. “Rotten luck, isn’t it?” he said cheerfully; and then after a pause, as if to himself, “I don’t believe I could have stood it much longer anyway.”

He went to Europe soon after to consult some famous Vienna oculist, and was gone more than a year; but it did his eyes no good: he remained totally blind. When he came back, he told me he had decided to take up detective work. I wondered if he were joking. He seemed aware of my surprise; for he smiled, and remarked simply, “I don’t wonder

you think I'm crazy, but wait and see." I did not have to wait long either; for it was not more than a month later that Varley told me how Garth had spotted an anonymous blackmailer for him, and a few days after this Forsythe cornered me in the dining-room of the Harvard Club, and insisted on telling me about the recovery of his safe-deposit key. I was about to tell him to go to the devil, when he mentioned Garth's name, and then I listened eagerly enough.

And before long I heard from other friends—Randolph Stewart, Mrs. Jack Keith, old Francis Applegate, Sydney Brewster, my cousins, the Thorp twins—of Garth's activities. Many of his exploits were not in themselves remarkable; but the fact that a blind man was the author of them made them seem so, of course. No one could understand how it was possible for him to succeed with such a handicap—it seemed as marvellous to me as to anybody; and I was curious to find out how he did it. But a press of legal work kept me busy at the time; so that I had no leisure to look him up; and when I found an opportunity, he had left town.

As I told Arthur, I had never heard of Garth's interesting himself in any case of unavoidable publicity such as a murder mystery; and I was afraid when he found out that David Mears had been the victim of foul play, he would refuse to help us.

It was, indeed, largely with the intention of trying to overcome his scruples that I had sent for him; but to my relief I soon found that my fears were needless. In fact I had no opportunity of expressing them; for after he had enquired how I was getting on, he brought up the subject himself.

"I see you've been worrying for fear I shouldn't care to be mixed up in a case like this," he began. "You needn't have been. I shouldn't have come at all, if I hadn't been willing to take my share of whatever notoriety may result from it."

"I knew how confoundedly shy you were about being in the limelight," I admitted.

He smiled.

"If I've balked at it so far, it's been due chiefly to my vanity, I'm afraid."

"Your vanity?"

"Yes, I didn't want to risk losing what little reputation I've got by a public failure. I wanted to become a little surer of myself before tackling anything so big. Maybe I'm in too much of a hurry to do so as it is. It would be more sensible of me, I daresay, to get a little more experience on the quiet first; but I've been itching to try my hand at something of the sort for a good while, and when I got your wire, the temptation was too strong to resist. Before long, probably, I shall regret having yielded to it."

"Don't you believe it," I rejoined. "If we can't clear up this affair between us, I'll give up my law practice, and take to digging ditches or driving a grocery wagon for a living. But how did you know it was a murder case? It wasn't stated so in the papers, was it?"

"No, they all had it an accident; but I know, of course, you wouldn't have telegraphed me if it hadn't been something else."

"Has anything been printed since about its being a murder?" I enquired anxiously.

"Not to my knowledge."

"Good!" I cried. "We shan't be pestered then by any more reporters."

"Don't be too sure of that," he said. "There was one here this morning."

"Not a red-haired young scamp by the name of Cassidy?"

"That's the fellow."

I groaned.

"What did he want?"

"He wanted to know if you'd found out yet who killed David Mears."

"He didn't see you, did he?"

"No, I let Keaton talk to him."

I asked Garth what else Cassidy had said.

"He told Keaton that if you and he were such fools you couldn't tell when a murder had been com-

mitted, you'd better send for someone to open your eyes for you."

"Confound his impudence," I growled, forgetting that I had only myself to thank for his unflattering estimate of our intelligence. "I hope to the deuce he won't come butting in any more."

"I don't believe he will," Garth replied, "after what Keaton said to him. It was hardly in the nature of an invitation."

"I suppose Arthur has told you everything about the affair?" I went on.

"Practically everything, I imagine. I've jotted down the main points of his story here"—he took some typewritten sheets out of his pocket. "You might run over them," he added, "and see if he's left out anything of importance. It'll help to keep them fresh in my mind, if you'll be good enough to read them aloud."

I did so, struck by the neatness and accuracy of the writing. It was hard to realise that a blind man had done it; and, as I learned later, on a small, portable machine with a crowded keyboard which he always carried about with him.

"I guess he's given you the main facts, so far as I know them anyway," I said when I had finished reading. Except for a brief account of David Mears' funeral, and mention of Randall's return, there was nothing new to me in the narrative. "But I can't

believe there's been nothing more doing since I've been laid up. At the rate things happened the first twenty-four hours after I got here, there ought to be about ten more pages of these notes, and a list of casualties a foot long beside."

" 'It never rains but it pours,' " he reminded me. "You can't expect such a water-spout as you got caught in to last a week, though. I should think you'd had excitement enough anyway to last you for a while."

"I suppose I have," I replied. "I'd have acquired a fatal craving for it, probably, if I'd had any more; but I must confess I was beginning to like it, and I hate to think it may be perfectly safe for me to venture out after sunset now without a body-guard, or to go to bed with no prospect whatever of being murdered in my sleep."

"It's all very well to joke about it," he began, when Arthur burst in upon us in a state of the wildest excitement and alarm.

"Margaret," he cried, "has disappeared!"

CHAPTER X

MARGARET DISAPPEARS

"DISAPPEARED!" I exclaimed, half rising from my chair. "What do you mean?"

"Just what I said," Arthur replied. "She's gone. No one has seen her since nine o'clock this morning. We've been looking for her for hours: we've hunted everywhere." He was quite distracted with grief and anxiety.

"Pull yourself together," I said, "and tell us about it."

"She started to walk to the village right after breakfast—at least that's where she told the maid she was going. No one seems to know whether she actually went in that direction or not—but if she did, she never reached it. I couldn't find anyone there or on the road who'd seen her. It's nearly six hours since she left. She ought to have been back long ago, unless—My God!" he broke off. "If anything has happened to her——!"

"It won't help matters for you to go into hysterics over it," I told him. He needed a rough reminder of the sort more than sympathy just then, it seemed

to me. "You'll need to keep cool, if you're going to be any use finding her. I'm afraid I can't help you much: it was all I could do to get as far from my bed as this."

He turned abruptly to Garth.

"Can you suggest anything?" he asked. "I've sent Dent"—he was the new coachman—"and Randall to search the woods for her, and——"

"You don't know if she got any letters this morning, do you?" Garth interrupted.

Arthur seemed surprised at the question.

"Why, yes," he said, "three or four of them, but I don't see——"

"Find them, please, if you can. By the way, did she seem at all worried before she left?"

"I didn't see her," he answered; "but I'll ask the maid, if you want me to." And he started to leave the room.

"You might bring her back with you," Garth added. "I'd like to question her."

"What do you make of it?" I asked him when Arthur had gone. "Do you think it's at all likely that anything's happened to her, as Keaton fears?"

"There's no use speculating about it," he replied, "till we get at the facts. Then we shall have something to go upon."

Despite the possibility that Margaret's prolonged absence might have some sinister significance, I felt

sure that Arthur was worrying unnecessarily about it. She had probably changed her mind about going to town and gone for a walk instead. She might have lost her way, or become tired and sat down to rest and gone to sleep—I had done the same thing often myself—or she might even have sprained her ankle; but I did not believe that she had met with any serious mishap. The neighbourhood, as Arthur had himself assured me, was quite free from tramps or other doubtful characters; so that the more I thought of it, the less likely it seemed that she should have been attacked by any such gentry. I realised, however, how little such arguments would console me, were I in Arthur's place; and so I did not speak of them when he returned a moment later with the maid—a thin, rather oldish woman, with a sallow, sharp-featured face, and hard, defiant black eyes. She looked, I thought, both nervous and frightened.

"Be so good as to tell us just what Miss Ellis said to you before she left the house this morning," Garth began in an encouraging tone, as if he had sensed the woman's embarrassment and wanted to put her at her ease.

"She said she was goin' to the village, just as I told Mr. Keaton," she replied shortly.

"Did she say how long she expected to be gone?"

"No, sir."

"Or why she was going?"

"No, sir."

"Have you any idea why?"—He seemed to be straining every nerve to catch what she said. I could not understand it; for I knew he was not in the least deaf, and she spoke distinctly enough.

"No, sir," she repeated.

Garth's tension relaxed. His face grew suddenly stern.

"That's not the truth," he said sharply.

She gave him a startled look.

"How do you know it ain't?" she snapped. "I mean——"

"Never mind about that," he broke in. "I want a correct answer to my question."

"I told you once," she retorted sullenly.

"You told me a lie," he said quietly, but there was something threatening in his tone. "You ought to know better than to lie to me—Maggie Sullivan."

The woman gave a quick gasp, and what little colour she had faded slowly from her face. She stared at Garth with a strange mixture of fear and bewilderment in her eyes.

"Well," he said impatiently, "I'm waiting for you to speak."

For an instant she hesitated, making her choice, as it seemed, between two evils.

"She went to meet someone, I think," she blurted out at last—"a gentleman I guess it was."

Arthur faced her, his eyes blazing.

"You lie!" he cried fiercely.

She shrank back from him.

"Ask him," she said, pointing at Garth.

"She's telling the truth, or what she believes to be the truth," he said. "I'm sure of that."

"And I tell you she lies," Arthur repeated angrily. "You don't expect me to believe what she's just said, do you?"—He laughed bitterly.—"If I did, I'd put a bullet through my head."

Garth seemed quite unmoved by his outburst.

"You're anxious, I suppose, that Miss Ellis should be found?" he asked quietly.

"What a question!" Arthur exclaimed.

"Very well, then," Garth continued in a more decisive tone, "I would suggest that you try to control your feelings, and aid instead of hindering us to get at the facts."

"But I tell you——" Arthur began.

"It's quite natural, of course," Garth broke in, "that you should be unwilling to believe anything that may seem to reflect in the slightest upon Miss Ellis; but it strikes me you're rather hasty in arriving at such a conclusion. Suppose she did go to meet someone, as this woman says. There are plenty of possible reasons to explain her doing so besides the one you have seized upon; you must see that."

Arthur started to reply: then changed his mind.

"Can you tell us anything more?" Garth went on, again addressing the maid, whose frightened eyes had never left his face.

"Only this, sir," she said. "I think her goin' had something to do with a letter she got this mornin'. She was readin' it when I came into her room, and she seemed sort of excited like, as though there was somethin' in it that had got her all stirred up."

Garth turned to Arthur, and asked him if he had found any letters in Margaret's room.

"Yes," he said, "but I've read them, and there's nothing in any of them that could possibly account for her disappearance."

"I was afraid she would have taken it with her. She may have left the envelope that it came in, though. Would you mind seeing?"

Arthur went to look for it.

"You're sure, are you," Garth said to the maid, "that you've told us everything?"

Again she seemed to hesitate.

"She took an envelope with her," she said at last. "I saw her snatch it out of her trunk and shove it in her waist when she thought I wasn't watchin' her."

Garth leaned a little forward.

"What sort of an envelope?" he asked.

"I didn't get a good look at it," she answered, "but I sh'd say it was about that long."—She held her hands some ten inches apart.

"Legal business size," I suggested.

Garth nodded.

"Was she dressed suitably for a journey?" he enquired.

"She had her jacket and gloves on."

"But she didn't take her travelling bag, or her cloak, or anything else with her?"

"No, sir, not that I know of."

"Very well," he said curtly. "That is all: you may go."

With a look of manifest relief she turned and hurried to the door.

I turned eagerly toward him when she had gone.

"Where have you met her before?" I asked.

"It would take too long to answer that question now," he replied. "I'll tell you some other time."

Arthur came back just then with a much crumpled envelope in his hand.

"I found this in the waste basket," he said, holding it out to Garth.

"Would you mind reading what there is on it?" he asked.

Arthur flushed at his absent-mindedness.

"Certainly not," he responded hastily. "It seems to have been mailed here in the village," he added when he had read the superscription. "There's only one postmark on it anyway."

"And the writing?" Garth queried. "Is it a man's or a woman's?"

"A man's, I should say," he answered. "Doesn't it look so to you, Phil?" And he handed me the envelope.

I studied it curiously. It was one of the smaller sized Government stamped envelopes, costing, I believe, about thirty cents a dozen. There was nothing indicative of the sender about it that I could see. The writing, however, had a certain individuality. I was inclined to agree with Arthur that it was a man's chirography, though I could hardly have told why. Perhaps the fact that it was a Government stamped envelope had a good deal to do with it—so few women ever use them. There was also a regularity about the spacing of the lines which one seldom observes in a feminine superscription. For the rest, the characters themselves had a certain compactness and vigour of down-strokes that suggested a masculine hand.

"Yes, I'm quite sure it was written by a man," I said when I had finished my scrutiny, "and by a man of some force of character, too, I should say."

"Is the writing disguised?" Garth asked.

"I haven't the slightest idea," I answered.

He went on to ask me several questions about the writing, many of which I found decidedly hard to answer, and some of which struck me as irrelevant,

almost absurd. I did my best, however, to give satisfactory replies to them all, for I realised that he had probably good reasons of his own for asking them.

While we were talking, Arthur moved restlessly about the room, going to the window every now and then to look out, and glancing continually at his watch. He was evidently a prey to the most harrowing thoughts, and half out of his head with anxiety and alarm. It was no wonder, considering how he worshipped the girl. Finally he muttered something about going to see whether the coachman or Randall had returned yet, and left us.

We sat silent for some time after he had gone. Garth was, I knew, trying to piece together the various bits of information we had gained in an effort to construct out of them a plausible explanation of Margaret's disappearance, and I was loath to interrupt him.

"Why," I thought, "should I not attempt something of the sort myself?" The result of my reflections was to convince me that the envelope which the maid said she saw Margaret hide in her waist must have had much to do with her going, if indeed it was not the sole reason for it. Had it anything to do with David Mears, I wondered? Somehow the more I thought of it, the surer I became that it had. I recalled my suspicion that the girl knew more about her guardian's affairs than she wished us

to suppose. If that were the case, might he not have entrusted her with certain valuable documents, fearing that an attempt might be made to rob him of them? Or might she not have taken them from his desk after it had been broken open by the man in the grey felt hat? or even before that? She had the key to it. But supposing this to be so, what could have been her object in taking them away with her?

"If we only knew what was in that letter?" I kept telling myself. I felt sure that the writer of it was some friend or enemy of David Mears, bent either upon helping her carry out some request of his, or threatening to reveal ugly secrets about him unless the papers were given to him. Had he for this reason insisted upon a secret interview with her, thinking either to frighten her into parting with them, or if that method failed, taking them from her by force? Margaret, I knew, was not the sort of girl to be easily intimidated. It seemed only too likely, therefore, that this unknown enemy of her guardian's—for I felt convinced that he was an enemy, not a friend—had resorted to violence to get them. I clenched my fists involuntarily as I pictured her attacked by such a ruffian, and perhaps knocked senseless by a blow from him. No wonder Arthur was half crazy at the thought of such a thing.

An exclamation from Garth interrupted my reflections.

"That's it, of course," he said half aloud. "That explains it!"

"Explains what?" I asked.

Instead of answering my question, he asked me to ring the bell and tell the maid he would like to speak to Mrs. Bartlett.

I did so, wondering what he could want of her; but though Mrs. Bartlett came at once, and they talked together for some time, my curiosity remained ungratified; for so far as I could see, Garth learned nothing at all from her. In fact he asked her only two questions which seemed to me to have any bearing on Margaret's disappearance—had she seen her since breakfast, and had she any idea where the girl could be?—to both of which she answered, "No."

"Well, you didn't get much out of her," I remarked disappointedly when she had left.

"I got what I wanted," he replied, smiling.

"You did?" I exclaimed. "What was it?"

"I merely wanted to make sure that I was right."

"Right about what?" I asked impatiently.

"In thinking that Miss Ellis never left the house."

CHAPTER XI

TWO STRANGERS ARRIVE

COULD Garth have seen my face at this announcement, he would doubtless have laughed; for it must have presented a very comical mixture of surprise and bewilderment.

"You find it hard to believe?" he asked in an amused tone. "I thought you might; and yet it's the only logical explanation which will fit the facts."

I asked him why it was.

"There were three things," he said, "which made me think she had never left the house—first, the fact that no one had seen her go; second, that if she had gone without anyone's noticing it, someone in the village would have seen her——"

"How can you be sure she intended going to the village?" I broke in. "We have only the maid's word for it. She may not have told you the truth."

"I've good grounds for thinking she did," he told me. I wondered what they were.

"And your third reason?" I asked.

"The fact that Mrs. Bartlett lied to me when I

asked her if she had seen Miss Ellis since breakfast, and if she had any idea where she could be."

"You seem to depend a great deal on your ability to tell whether people are speaking the truth to you or not," I remarked.

"I do," he replied. "It's of considerable assistance to me in many instances."

"I should think it might be," I said drily. "With such a wonderful knack as that you ought not to have much trouble finding out anything. All you need to do, it seems to me, is to keep on asking questions till you get the right answer."

"I wish it were as simple as that," he replied, smiling; "but there are a good many questions one can't very well ask; and it's one thing to be convinced in your own mind of a fact, and quite another to be able to prove it to the satisfaction of a judge and jury. Suppose, for instance, I were quite certain that you had murdered David Mears, I should have to be able to demonstrate the correctness of that belief by bringing forward a chain of evidence which would link you indubitably with the crime. It would be useless for me to expect anyone to believe that you were the murderer unless I could do this. The mere fact that I could tell whether you were speaking the truth or not in regard to the matter would be of absolutely no value in securing your conviction. It would be merely my word against yours.

"Regarding my ability to tell whether people are lying to me or not," he went on, "there is really nothing remarkable about it, though I don't blame you in the least for finding it hard to credit. It does look as though I were claiming some rather supernatural power, I daresay—a sort of mind-reading gift, perhaps, which I haven't got at all. It's simply a matter of ear, of being able to distinguish certain hardly noticeable changes in the human voice, and knowing what they mean. Almost anyone could learn to do it, if he took the pains."

"I can't quite believe that," I said. "I'm sure I couldn't anyway."

"It isn't a lawyer's business to find out the truth, I understand," he returned drily.

"Perhaps that's why I'm so stupid about getting it through my head how you knew Margaret had never left the house," I observed.

"The letter she got this morning had, of course, everything to do with it," he began. "Clearly enough it was a request for her to meet the writer of it somewhere, and it seems equally certain from her actions—especially in taking that envelope from her trunk—that she had made up her mind to grant the request."

"That's exactly the way I figured it out," I said; "but why didn't she go, if she'd made up her mind to? There wasn't anything to hinder her that I can see."

"That puzzled me, too, for a while," he replied, "until I recalled what the maid had said about her being all stirred up as she expressed it. It occurred to me then that if the matter were serious enough to disturb her so, there was a likelihood, a strong probability even, that she would have talked it over with someone before she went. There was only one person, of course, besides Keaton whom she could go to—Mrs. Bartlett."

I began to catch what he was driving at.

"Then Mrs. Bartlett is responsible for her disappearance?"

"I feel sure of it," he answered.

"But what has she done with her?" I demanded.

"We've still to find that out; but I shall be very much surprised if she hasn't been shut up all this time in Mrs. Bartlett's own room."

I whistled softly. An idea had just come to me which might explain everything.

"By thunder!" I cried. "I believe you're right, and what's more I think I know why she's kept her a prisoner." And I went on to tell him of my belief that the envelope the maid had seen Margaret put in her waist contained papers belonging to David Mears that he had either given her to take care of, or that she had taken from his desk since he was murdered. I told him, too, what Arthur had said about Mrs. Bartlett's devotion to the dead man, and

the impossibility of our persuading her to tell us anything concerning his past.

"It looks to me," I went on, "very much as though she were afraid that the girl might be going to do something which would result in bringing to light an old scandal connected with her guardian; and yet," I added, "she was as fond of him as Mrs. Bartlett was—more so, even—and a more loyal little soul never breathed. She'd be the last to do anything to blacken his memory, I'm sure. There must be some other reason for it."

It was some time before Garth spoke.

"I'm inclined to think you're on the right track just the same," he said at last. "Suppose we try to find out?"

"How?" I asked; but before he could reply, Arthur flung open the door.

"Thank God, she's back!" he cried.

I glanced quickly at Garth. Despite his blindness we might almost be said to have exchanged looks.

"That's splendid news," he told Arthur warmly.

"You bet it is!" I echoed. "Where on earth has she been all the time?"

Arthur frowned slightly.

"She said she'd rather not tell me," he replied.

"Well, that doesn't matter so long as she's back safe and sound," I remarked cheerfully, "and feels properly sorry for having scared us all half to death."

Evidently Arthur did not quite relish the bantering tone in which I spoke; for he made me no reply. Instead he turned to Garth.

"I'm sorry to have made you so much bother about it," he began, "and all for nothing——"

"Don't mention it," Garth interrupted "I was only too glad to try to be of some slight assistance in finding her, and I'm still more glad that there's no need of what little help I might possibly have been able to give you."

"Does Mrs. Bartlett know she's back?" I asked Arthur.

"By Jove! I don't believe she does," he replied. "I'll go and tell her. Poor old soul! She's been so worried about her, she's hardly left her room."

I stole another look at Garth. If he felt elated by this bit of news, his face showed no sign of it. As soon as Arthur had gone, however, he turned to me and smiled.

"It looks very much as if I were right, eh?" he said.

"It certainly does," I admitted; "but I'm hanged if I see why she did it."

"I'm going to ask her," he said, rising.

"You'll have a pleasant job of it," I assured him, laughing. "I'd rather tackle an old she-bear. Ten to one she'll tell you to mind your own business, and

emphasise her remarks by hitting you over the head with a broom stick."

"I'll risk it," he replied cheerfully, and away he went.

It was half an hour before he came back.

"Well, what luck?" I asked. "I was thinking of organising a relief expedition, if you had been gone much longer."

"I had the devil's own time of it."—He grinned ruefully.

I chuckled.

"I knew you would," I said. "I suppose she denied knowing anything whatever about it?"

"On the contrary," he replied, "she told me quite frankly that she had kept Miss Ellis locked up in her room all the time. I told her right off the reel that I knew she'd done so, and how I knew it. But when it came to getting her to say why she did it, I might as well have talked to a post. 'It's none of your business,' she snapped, and I'll be hanged if I could get another word out of her. She shut up like a clam."

"It took you a good while to accomplish that much," I remarked.

"Oh, I haven't been all this time talking to Mrs. Bartlett: I've been to see Miss Ellis, too."

"The devil you have!" I exclaimed. "And what did she have to say?"

“Precisely what Mrs. Bartlett did, though she put her refusal to explain matters in more polite language. She was very much disturbed when she found out that I knew where she’d been. ‘Did Mrs. Bartlett tell you?’ she asked me. ‘She admitted it when I accused her of having kept you shut up in her room,’ I answered. ‘But what made you think I was there?’ she said. I told her briefly how I came to that conclusion. ‘You seem very clever at finding out things,’ she remarked coldly when I had finished. ‘With such extraordinary ability you ought not to have much difficulty in learning what more you want to know without any help from me.’ ‘I’m always glad of any aid I can get,’ I replied humbly. She hesitated a moment. When she spoke I was really startled at the change in her voice. It was brusque, almost threatening.

“‘I don’t know what right you think you have to pry into my affairs, Mr. Garth,’ she began. ‘I can only say that I do not recognise any such right on your part, and I refuse to answer your questions regarding matters which don’t concern you in the least.’”

“Now will you be good?” I murmured.

Garth continued without noticing my interruption.

“I tried to explain to her that I was doing my best to solve the mystery of her guardian’s death. ‘If

that's the case,' she broke in, 'you're going about it in a very queer way.' I asked her what she meant, reminding her that it was necessary for me to learn everything I could about David Mears' past. 'I'm convinced,' I added, 'that you were intending to meet someone who knew him.' 'How do you know that?' she cried. 'I've reasons for thinking that those papers you were taking with you belonged to him,' I answered. 'They had nothing whatever to do with him,' she declared. 'I'm sorry,' I said, 'to be so rude as to doubt that.' I heard her gasp. 'I'm not accustomed to having my word doubted, Mr. Garth,' she said angrily, 'and by a stranger, too. Perhaps, if you have no more insulting things to say to me, you'll be good enough to leave the room.' "

"Phew!" I interrupted. "You have put your foot in it, haven't you? What did you want to call her a liar for? I don't see what good that did."

"I wasn't absolutely sure she was lying, and I had to make sure."

"Well, it seems to me you might have done it a trifle more diplomatically," I said. "Now you've gone and made an enemy of the girl, and you can't expect——"

"I know that," he broke in impatiently. "You don't suppose I'm such an idiot as not to realise what effect my remark would have on her?"

"But hang it all!" I cried. "If you're going to antagonise everyone mixed up in this affair, I don't see——"

"My dear fellow," he interrupted, "I'm sorry you don't approve of my actions, but possibly I may be supposed to know what I'm about?"

I grudgingly admitted it.

"Well, then," he continued quietly, "don't be too ready to find fault with my methods. There may be less madness in them than you think. In this particular instance I knew before I had talked with her two minutes that she intended to do everything in her power to prevent my finding out who murdered her guardian."

I stared at him incredulously.

"But why——?"

"I don't know why," he rejoined. "I only know that she does intend to; and such being the case, I had nothing to lose and a great deal to gain by saying what I did."

In spite of the conviction with which he spoke, I could not help doubting the truth of his assertion. It seemed unbelievable that Margaret should put obstacles in the way of our finding the murderer. Surely she of all persons should be the most eager to have him brought to justice. To picture her as indifferent, as opposed to it even, seemed to me utterly incredible. And yet I remembered how strongly she

had opposed our searching the desk, how relieved she had looked when Arthur had locked it and given her the key. Could it have been because she feared we might find there a clue to the murderer? Had her intended interview with the writer of the mysterious letter been for the purpose of shielding in any way someone she suspected of the crime?

I told myself angrily that I was crazy to imagine such things, that Garth must be wholly wrong in thinking she was determined to prevent his finding the guilty man. It was all due to some mistaken impression he had got of her, dependent for its correctness on nothing weightier than a fantastic faith in his ability to decide the most momentous questions from the tones of one's voice! Even those wonderful heroes of detective fiction put less of a tax on one's credulity than this serene assumption of being able to tell whether people were speaking the truth or not merely from hearing them talk. I uttered an involuntary grunt at the absurdity of it.

"Still comparing me with Baron Munchausen?" Garth enquired pleasantly.

"Not exactly," I said, "but I'll admit my thoughts were tending somewhat in that direction."

"You can't quite stomach the notion of Miss Ellis being set against our finding the murderer?"

"No, I can't," I admitted. "I'd almost as soon suspect her of having killed him."

"That's because you're lacking in imagination," he remarked.

"I've always understood," I retorted, "that too vivid an imagination was the greatest handicap a detective could have; that it made him suspect everybody, and set him chasing after a lot of imaginary clues that led nowhere."

"There's a good deal of truth in that idea," he replied; "but it isn't the vivid imagination that's to blame: it's the fact that it's allowed to run riot without any logical supervision. To succeed in solving any mystery a man must have imagination and lots of it. He must be able to conceive a limitless number of hypotheses to account for it—just as a scientist must be able to presuppose a number of theories to explain certain molecular affinities, for example. Where the average man blunders is because he lacks the necessary reasoning powers to enable him to select the right hypothesis from the others. His mind is not sufficiently keen to prevent him from taking the false theory for the true one, or else he becomes so prejudiced in favour of one particular theory that he is wilfully blind to its defects.

"The same thing holds true in detective work," he went on. "One must be able to imagine a myriad possible explanations of a crime—the more the better; but he must be equally ready to discard any or all of them, should the actual facts prove them untenable.

It won't do, however, to reject any possible explanation simply because at first glance it seems too fanciful and unlikely to be worth considering."

"But you don't mean to tell me," I said, "that you think Miss Ellis is connected in any way with the crime?"

"Why not?" he asked.

"Why not!" I repeated hotly. "I'll tell you why not—because she's a fine, sweet-natured girl, not a bloody-minded murderess."

"I grant you that," he replied calmly; "but you haven't answered my question logically."

"Logic be damned!" I exclaimed, exasperated at the idea of his harbouring such a monstrous suspicion.

He laughed.

"That sounds a trifle odd from a lawyer; but before you get angry enough to throw something at me, I'll confess that there's no reason for suspecting her of having had anything to do with her guardian's death. I only advanced the supposition to give you a chance to exercise that logical discrimination in rejecting untenable hypotheses of which we were speaking: instead of which you have given a very striking illustration of the commonest method people employ in making up their minds on such matters—jumping to a conclusion as their feelings prompt them without stopping to think. In other words they take their emotions for a guide in place of their reason.

Possibly, considering how little reasoning ability most people have, they do well to adopt this method, though it can scarcely be recommended as a sure way of arriving at the truth."

"I suppose not," I growled, a little irritated at being made the unwitting subject of a psychological experiment; "but you can hardly blame me for getting mad at such a fool idea, and telling you plainly what I thought of it."

"I don't blame you in the least," he rejoined, smiling; "but it won't do, I see, for me to turn my imagination loose when you're around. I'll promise after this to keep a leash on it."

I told him he'd better, if it was apt to indulge in any more such crazy antics as that.

"But seriously, Steve," I went on, "I'm anxious to know what you make of this whole affair. Have you any idea who killed him, what the motive could have been, and why——?"

"Hold on!" he protested. "I can't answer more than six questions at once."

"Go ahead, then, and answer them one at a time. Remember, I've been waiting three whole days to find out."

"It won't take me long to," he replied. "One little 'No' will do for the whole lot. Does that satisfy you?"

"No," I said disappointedly, "it doesn't. I

hoped you'd got some ideas on the subject by this time."

"Well, perhaps I have," he admitted; "but I'd be afraid to mention them. You'd think me crazy."

I grunted impatiently.

"How about that blood stain I found on the candlestick?" I said. "Do you think there's any chance of a burglar having killed him?"

"I hope to find out within the next hour," he replied.

"The deuce you do!" I said. Then I burst out laughing. "You're expecting some sort of a telepathic communication from him, I suppose," I began, when the sound of wheels on the driveway below caught my attention, and I broke off to see who it was.

A light runabout—which I recognised as the property of Silas Downs, the station-master—was just drawing up at the door. In it sat two men whom I had never seen before. One of them was a tall, thin man, perhaps forty-five or fifty years old, with a clean-shaven, hatchet face, keen and eager looking. The other was some years younger, of a shorter heavier build, and coarser features, his upper lip marred by a half-grown bristly red moustache. He was rather flashily dressed, and seemed very ill at ease. He hesitated an instant before getting out, and apparently asked a question of the older man, who nodded impatiently in reply.

"Who can they be?" I demanded, after describing them to Garth. "They don't look like reporters."

"The tall, thin chap is Stimpson of the Coats-Miller Detective Agency," he replied promptly, "and the other one is undoubtedly your friend of the candlestick."

CHAPTER XII

GARTH DOES AN ASTOUNDING THING

I HAD not recovered from my astonishment before the maid appeared, and said there were two gentlemen downstairs to see Garth.

"Show them up here, please," he told her, "unless," he added, turning to me, "you're afraid it will tire you too much."

"Nothing of the sort!" I exclaimed. "I wouldn't miss seeing them for anything. It won't hurt me half so much as to sit here wondering what you're talking about."

"All right," he said, "only don't let Dr. Satterlee blame me if he finds you a wreck to-morrow."

A minute later the two men came in. The younger man—whom I could not yet believe to be actually my hypothetical burglar—was evidently in something closely approaching a panic. Fear had drained all the blood from his face and brought out a cold sweat on his forehead. His eyes wore the desperate, hunted look of a trapped animal. If ever guilt were written plain on a man's face, it was on his. I felt suddenly that I had been right after all in my theory as to

how David Mears had been killed, and that his murderer stood before me. It gave me a keen thrill of excitement.

Garth introduced me to Stimpson, and asked them to be seated. Then he turned to the other man.

"Now, Parsons," he said quietly, "I want you to tell us all about it—just what you did on the night of October 15th, and what part, if any, you had in the death of Mr. Mears."

"I didn't have nothing to do with it," cried the man in a thick, choking voice. "I swear——"

"Begin at the beginning," Garth told him. "You left his employ about a month ago, I believe?"

"The thirteenth of September it was, sir, and nobody can say I didn't do my work right and proper, or that I warn't always sober and respectful. But ther' was some things he hadn't no right to expect me to do, and when I told him so——"

"Never mind about that," Garth interrupted. "You had a row with Mr. Mears before you went: we know that. I daresay he was as much to blame for it as you were. It doesn't matter. Go on with your story."

Parsons, however, seemed curiously eager to make it plain to us that he was quite justified in leaving David Mears' service, and that though the treatment he had received at the latter's hands was enough,

as he expressed it, to "drive a man crazy," he had borne it all with the temper of a saint, and "hadn't laid up no grudge against him."

By dint of repeated interruptions and much sharp questioning Garth succeeded finally in getting from him a fairly coherent account of his actions the night I arrived at Mears House. He admitted that he had broken into the dining-room about eleven o'clock with the intention of stealing the silver before David Mears locked it up as usual in the library closet on going to bed; and that when he got in, he heard someone talking with David Mears in the library. He did not know the man's voice, but he thought it sounded like Mr. Keaton's. On looking around he found, much to his disgust, that the silver had already been locked up, and though he knew that he could hardly hope to force the closet door without being heard, he resolved to wait and make the attempt after David Mears had gone to bed.

While he waited, the men in the next room got talking louder and louder, until finally they were quarrelling fiercely. Then he heard the sound of a blow followed by a heavy fall, and fearing that it might arouse someone and that he would be discovered, he made his escape. He had left a buggy at the entrance to the driveway, and he drove back toward town as fast as he could go. When I had stepped out into the middle of the road, he thought I was

trying to hold him up, and whipped up his horse to prevent my doing so. He then drove hurriedly through Shelburne to the next town, Franklin, where he left the horse and buggy in the stable of a friend there from whom he had borrowed them, and took the 4 A.M. train to Boston.

While the butler was finishing his story, Garth whispered a few words to Stimpson, who nodded and left the room. He came back just as Parsons had ended his recital, and handed something to Garth—I did not see what it was; but as Stimpson stepped back to his seat, Garth held it out in front of him, and said sharply to Parsons:

“What about this?”

It was the brass candlestick! I could see the red smear on the outer edge of the base.

Parsons saw it, too. His eyes seemed glued to it, in fact. Twice he opened his mouth to speak, but the words would not come.

“Well?” queried Garth impatiently.

The butler’s silence was broken at last by a gurgling sob which came from deep down in his throat. It was like the gasp of some dying animal, horrible to hear.

“You recognise it, I see,” Garth observed drily. “How did that stain get on the edge of it?”

“I—I don’t know,” Parsons gasped. He was shaking from head to foot.

"You lie!" said Garth sternly. "I had hoped it would show you the folly of lying to me any more; but if it doesn't——" He paused ominously.

The butler looked desperately around, as if seeking some possible way of escape—Stimpson watched him as a cat watches a mouse. Then a beaten look came over his face; his whole body relaxed; I almost expected to see him slide from his chair to the floor.

"Well," Garth repeated, "are you going to tell me, or not?"

"I reck'n I might as well," muttered Parsons. He gulped two or three times and moistened his lips with his tongue.

"I done it," he said at last.

I drew a long breath. Instead of the feeling of satisfaction, of triumph which I had expected to experience on finding the murderer, I was conscious only of a keen pity for the man, mingled with a sense of shame at being a witness of his undoing. A sudden loathing for the whole dreadful business and the part I had played in it swept over me.

"Tell us how you did it," Garth said.

"It was after the other feller had gone," Parsons began sullenly. "They'd had a row like I told you, only ther' warn't no blow struck. I was waitin' for him to go upstairs, but he started for the dining-room instead. I didn't have no time to get out—I

was close to the library door, and I knew if he got the chance, he'd shoot me; so I grabs the candlestick off the mantelpiece and steps behind the door just as he opens it. Then—I let him have it. I didn't intend to kill him," he added under his breath, his face twitching. "So help me God!"

"And you left him lying there?" Garth asked.

The butler hesitated an instant before replying.

"No, sir, I dragged him into the library."

"So as to make it seem that the other man had killed him?"

"Yes, sir."

"What did you do then?"

"I put the candlestick back on the mantelpiece, and cleared out as quick as I could. I was in too much of a hurry to get away to stop to see if he was hurt bad or not."

Garth remained for a moment deep in thought.

"I don't think there is anything more I want to ask of you," he said finally. "You may go."

To say that all three of us were astounded at his words would scarcely convey an adequate idea of their effect upon us. Both Stimpson and I stared at Garth in perfect bewilderment. Parsons seemed even more amazed, if possible. He looked like a man struggling in the grip of a nightmare.

"You don't mean to say you ain't goin' to have

me pinched?" he said at last—wonder, incredulity, and hope contending for the mastery of his voice and reflected alternately in his face.

"No," said Garth, "you may go back to your job; but I warn you that if you make the slightest effort to run away, it will mean your instant arrest."

I wondered if I were dreaming. I had just heard this man confess to a murder—his guilt was stamped so plainly on his face that it needed no further confirmation—and Garth was coolly proposing to let him go scot-free!

Stimpson recovered from his surprise before I did. He took a step forward.

"I hardly see, Mr. Garth," he began, "how you can——"

"One moment, Stimpson," Garth interrupted. "You are not here to question my acts, nor do I feel called upon to explain them to you. I hired you to do certain things on the strict understanding that your work was to be carried on with the utmost secrecy, and exactly according to my instructions. Isn't that so?"

"Yes, sir, it is, but——"

"Such being the case," Garth went on, "I shall expect you to live up to your agreement, and not to interfere in any way with my arrangements. Is that clear to you?"

"Yes, sir," repeated Stimpson; "but I must say, sir, that I'd feel a good deal easier in my mind, if you'd tell me——"

"Later I will," broke in Garth, "but for the present you'll have to be satisfied with my assurance that it's all right. There shall be no miscarriage of justice, I promise you."

"Very well, sir," said the detective slowly—he was itching, I could see, to snap his handcuffs on Parsons' wrists—"I'll do as you say, sir; but"—he shook his head doubtfully—"it's irregular, sir, very irregular indeed."

"Quite possibly," Garth admitted drily.

The detective turned to Parsons.

"Come along," he said gruffly.

The butler got to his feet—he seemed still in a state of muddled stupor—and staggered after him to the door.

I sprang up.

"Hold on!" I cried.

Stimpson wheeled about, blocking the doorway, and his thin, eager face brightened.

I turned to Garth.

"You have some good reason, I suppose, for doing such an unheard-of thing as this," I said, "but I don't propose to sit here and see that man go free till I know what it is."

A sudden anger darkened his face. He seemed

on the point of making me some biting retort; but he changed his mind, and smiled ironically.

"You can wait downstairs, Stimpson," he said, "till I send you word."

The two men went out.

"Now, then," he asked coldly, "what is it you want to know?"

"What you mean by letting that man go," I answered, "after his confessing that he killed him?"

"Because I'm practically sure he didn't kill him."

"Oh, you are, are you!" I cried. "Well, it seems to me he ought to know a little about it himself. I don't suppose you'll tell me this time that he was lying?"

"No, he was telling the truth."

"Why don't you have him arrested, then?" I demanded.

He looked surprised.

"Haven't I just told you that I feel practically sure he didn't kill him?"

"See here, Garth——" I began angrily.

"I wouldn't get excited about it, if I were you," he broke in calmly. "It won't do your fever any good, and there isn't really anything to get excited over. Just because Parsons himself believes he killed him, doesn't prove that he did. On the contrary what I've learned from him makes me almost certain

that the murder was committed by someone else, and that the blow Parsons struck him with the candlestick did no more than stun him."

"How can you be sure of that?" I asked sceptically.

"I'm not wholly sure of it," he replied. "If I were I shouldn't arrange to keep him under a strict surveillance, but all the facts we've discovered so far tend to prove it. I need hardly remind you that it wasn't possible for Parsons to have taken the body out of the house and thrown it over the cliff, or point out to you the absurdity of someone else doing it, if David Mears was already dead when he came to murder him. It should, therefore, be perfectly clear to you that the butler can hardly be the man we're after."

I said nothing.

"Of course," he went on, "he's guilty of two serious offences—attempted burglary and felonious assault; and later he'll be made to answer for them; but it would be exceedingly unwise to press those charges against him just now, you must see that."

I realised that beside exposing us to the badgering of reporters and the blundering interference of the police, it would make it very much harder also for us to find the real criminal.

"Yes," I said, "I suppose that's so."

"Possibly, then, my unwillingness to have Parsons

arrested may strike you now as a little less extraordinary?"

I admitted it with as good grace as I could.

"Will you be kind enough, then," he asked me, "to send Stimpson word that he and Parsons are at liberty to go?"

I rang the bell for the maid.

"There's one thing more I'd like to know," I said—"how you found out that Parsons was the burglar?"

"That's simple enough," he replied. "His entering the house at that comparatively early hour before David Mears had gone to bed showed that he must have been familiar with the place. Anyone ignorant of the dead man's habit of locking up the silver the last thing at night would have waited till he was abed and asleep before breaking in, so that he could prowl about with less risk of being caught. All that I had to do was to ask Keaton a few questions about the servants who had left recently to satisfy myself that Parsons was the most likely one of them to have done it. I wired Stimpson immediately to look him up and bring him down here to-day, if possible."

"I don't see how he got him to come," I said.

"It was a choice between that and going to jail. The man has a criminal record: he was afraid to refuse."

I felt quite disappointed at the simplicity of the whole proceeding. There was nothing marvellous about it at all. I ought to have had sense enough myself to have suspected Parsons. Probably I should have done so, I reflected, if I had not been too ill lately to think clearly on any subject.

CHAPTER XIII

A NIGHT OF SURPRISES

DESPITE my determination to disregard Dr. Satterlee's advice and play the invalid no longer, my head was swimming so from sitting up all the afternoon that I regretfully abandoned my intention of going down to dinner, and crawled meekly back to bed as soon as Garth had gone. I must have fallen asleep almost immediately; for, as I learned afterward, I made no reply when the maid knocked at my door to ask what I would have to eat; and it was several hours later before I woke up.

That I should have waked at the exact moment I did may have been merely a coincidence, or it may have been due—as the psychologists would doubtless prefer to think—to some mysterious warning from my subliminal self. At any rate I did awake, with all my senses extraordinarily alert, to a vivid consciousness of impending danger. What that danger was I realised instantly. There was someone in my room! Although it was absolutely dark and I could neither see nor hear anything, I was quite sure of it.

I took my revolver noiselessly from under my

pillow, and listened. Outside I could hear nothing but the soft wash of the waves. The house itself was as quiet as the grave; and yet I felt certain that within a few yards of me, perhaps within reach of my arm, stood somebody. I strained my ears to catch the sound of his breathing, longing for the comforting assurance of the electric light switch at my own bedside in New York. One turn of it, and I should have had the intruder at my mercy.

As it was I could do nothing but lie still and wait for him to move. But while I waited, my finger on the trigger, it occurred to me that it might be Garth or Arthur, who had stolen in quietly to see that I was all right, and who kept still and carried no light for fear of waking me. It would be a fine thing, I reflected, to shoot one of them instead of a burglar! I was strongly tempted to cry out, "Who's there?" but caution kept me quiet.

I found it impossible after a while, though, to lie still any longer. There were matches on the table beside me, and very slowly and carefully I felt about till I had found them. Then I took three, and holding their heads close together I struck them all alight at once, sitting straight up in bed as I did so with the revolver outstretched in my other hand. There was no one there.

I sat staring about the empty room until the matches began to burn my fingers. Then I got up,

and lighting a candle, I looked in the closet and under the bed. The bathroom door was closed, but the hall-door was wide open. The intruder must have slipped out that way, I decided. I blamed myself for not having stirred sooner. By this time he had doubtless escaped from the house altogether. I could not hope to capture him now, even had I felt equal to making the attempt, which I did not. Already my overstrung nerves had commenced to relax, leaving me weak and dizzy. I had no choice but to go back to bed, or else arouse some other member of the household.

No doubt that is what I should have done, but at the time it struck me as an unnecessary and foolish proceeding. The burglar would have escaped long before I could hope to wake anybody. I began to wonder also if there had actually been anyone in my room after all. I had been perfectly sure of it a few minutes before; but the conviction was based on nothing so solid and undeniable as the evidence of my senses: it was no more than a strange, inexplicable assurance, which for all I could tell might be merely a delusion. The more I thought of it, the more likely it seemed.

I blew out the candle and went back to bed, disgusted with myself for having been so foolishly alarmed. And without more ado, I turned over and went to sleep.

It seemed but an instant later when I was again wide awake. There could be no doubt this time as to what had aroused me; for in my ears still rang the scream of a frightened woman. I heard it again as I scrambled hastily out of bed—a sharp, agonised cry that broke horribly upon the silence. In another second I had lighted the candle, seized my revolver, and darted out into the hall. There was no mistaking the quarter from which the cries had come—they had issued, I was sure, from Margaret's room.

I burst in just in time to see a man's hands loose their grip on the window-sill. Rushing to the window, I stuck my head out and peered down into the blackness. I could see nothing, but I heard something that sounded like a groan, and I fired twice in the direction of the sound. Then I wheeled about to find Mrs. Bartlett and Arthur at my elbow. And a queer looking trio we must have been—Arthur and I in our pyjamas, and Mrs. Bartlett a towering white figure in her night-gown and curl-papers. But we were too disturbed just then to think of how we looked, too amazed and alarmed to do anything but stare questioningly at one another and about the empty room. Margaret was not there!

Arthur was the first to recover from the shock of the discovery. A half-strangled cry burst from him, and he dashed out of the door and across the hall to the stairs. I started to follow him when some-

thing stopped me. It was the sound of a moan from the curtained alcove. Mrs. Bartlett darted toward it ahead of me, and looked in. I heard her gasp. Then she turned and faced me, frowning.

"This is no place for you," she snapped. "You'd better go back to your room."

I stood my ground.

"If she's badly hurt," I said, "you may need my help in looking after her. I'll wait here till I know."

She flashed an angry look at me.

"I can attend to her myself," she replied curtly. "It isn't proper for you to be here anyway."

Serious as the situation was, I could not help smiling—so absurd did it seem for her to be concerned over conventionalities at such a moment. But I had no wish to argue the matter with her: it was more important that Margaret should be looked after without delay; and so I merely nodded and went out. I was annoyed, though, to hear her lock the door after me, as if she feared I might change my mind and burst unceremoniously in again.

"Really," I thought with some irritation, "she might give me credit for better manners than that."

I paused a moment, undecided whether to go in search of Arthur, or to rouse Garth and tell him what had happened. It struck me as queer that he should not have come himself to find out. He could

hardly have slept through it all, I thought. Even if Margaret's screams hadn't waked him, the shots I had fired must have done so; and with his extraordinary ability to find his way about unaided, there was nothing to have prevented his joining us. I began to feel vaguely alarmed about him. Possibly I had not been mistaken after all in thinking that somebody had been in my room when I awoke the first time. If so, he might have paid Garth a visit as well, and with more sinister results. The possibility unnerved me for an instant. Then I pulled myself together, and crossing the hall, I rapped loudly on his door. There was no answer. I found the door unlocked, and went in, fully expecting to find him either drugged or murdered. He was not there. The bed had not been slept in at all.

"What can it mean?" I asked myself. "Why didn't he go to bed? Where has he gone? What has become of him?"

A slight noise made me whirl quickly about. Garth stood in the doorway, holding an automatic revolver pointed straight at me.

"Up with your hands!" he cried.

For a second I forgot his blindness and stared at him in open-mouthed astonishment.

"Be quick about it!" he added sharply.

Involuntarily I started to obey him. Then the humour of the situation struck me and I laughed.

He lowered his revolver instantly and took a step toward me.

"Why the devil didn't you speak?" he demanded. "I came within an ace of shooting you. It would have served you right if I had."

"I'm thankful you didn't," I said. "You had that confounded gun pointed straight at me."

"I thought I located you pretty accurately," he remarked, sitting down on the bed and beginning to take off his coat. "Phew! I'm tired!"

"I should think you might be," I said, "if you've been chasing 'round all night. What have you been doing?"

"I'll tell you about it to-morrow," he replied, yawning.

"You'll tell me about it right now," I declared, "or I'll know the reason why."

"Pass me my pipe and tobacco, then, or I'll be asleep before I'm half through."

I got them for him, remembering as I did so that I hadn't said a word about the attack on Margaret.

"Perhaps after all you'd better let me tell my story first," I said. "It may be more important."

"Fire away," he returned cheerfully.

I began by telling him of my waking up and thinking someone was in the room.

"You can skip that," he broke in, smiling. "I

was the mysterious person that disturbed your slumbers."

"You were!" I exclaimed. "Then I'm mighty glad I decided not to shoot."

"Yes, it was just as well you didn't," he agreed. "It might have spoiled everything."

"I might have killed you, if that's what you mean."

He chuckled.

"I really thought once you were going to shoot at me," he said. "I was immensely relieved when you changed your mind about it. I was standing within a foot of you," he went on, "when you woke up and began fumbling under your pillow for your revolver. I thought first of speaking to you, but I decided it would be a good chance to see whether I could move about so quietly you wouldn't hear me—you have pretty keen ears, so I knew it would be a fair test of my ability. Your heavy breathing, of course, helped a great deal. Finally I guessed you were becoming rather restless and that you wouldn't lie quiet much longer, so I slipped out just as you were making such a racket trying to find the matches."

"But why on earth did you want to come into my room at all?" I asked.

"I thought you were going to tell your story first," he reminded me. I stifled my curiosity and pro-

ceeded to do so. He listened to me without betraying the slightest surprise, or even asking a single question.

"Well," I broke off, irritated at his indifference, "I guess I've told you everything. You seem about as much interested in it as though I'd been reading a last year's Presidential Message aloud to you."

"On the contrary," he said, "I'm very much interested—to know how you happened to get such an extraordinarily mistaken idea of what actually took place."

"Huh?" I ejaculated.

"To be more explicit," he continued briskly, "I should like very much to learn—first, why you thought it was Miss Ellis who screamed, secondly how you came to the conclusion that she had been attacked by a burglar, and lastly why you should suppose that it was she whom Mrs. Bartlett found in the alcove."

"You don't mean to tell me it wasn't she!"

"It certainly was not."

"Then who the deuce was it?"

"Maggie Sullivan."

"And it was she whom I heard scream?"

"No," he said, "it was me."

I stared at him incredulously.

"But what's become of Margaret?" I asked.

"If that wasn't her——"

"You needn't worry about her," he interrupted.
"She's safe in bed by this time."

"And Arthur?"

"He's still hunting for that burglar of yours, I imagine, whom he thinks ran off with her. Any more questions you'd like to ask? I'm getting frightfully sleepy."

"I'm not," I declared, consumed with curiosity to find out what he had been doing, "and I won't go back to bed till you've told me how you found out all these things."

"Very well," he answered resignedly. "Wait till I get this pipe going."

CHAPTER XIV

BLINDMAN'S BUFF

"LET me say at the start," Garth began, "that you'll find it hard to believe some of the things I'm going to tell you, especially as I shan't mention certain suspicions of mine——"

I interrupted him to say that I was sorry he didn't trust me enough to do so.

"Good Lord! it isn't that," he replied. "I know, of course, that you wouldn't purposely do or say anything that might interfere with my plans. Unfortunately it isn't one's intentions that are to blame always in such matters. What I'm afraid of is that you'd unconsciously betray such knowledge—the more you tried not to, the likelier you'd be to do it."

"You don't give me credit for much self-control," I grumbled. "I've had some practice, you know, in keeping my mouth shut."

He admitted it, but went on to say that I should have to be a very skilful actor indeed to keep anyone from guessing that I shared his suspicions.

"I don't want to hurt your feelings, Phil," he

continued, "but it really wouldn't do to take the chance. I'm sure you'll agree with me later that I was right about it. You see," he added very earnestly, as I remained silent, "it means a good deal to me to succeed in this affair. If I failed through neglecting to take every possible precaution, I should feel pretty badly about it, and I shouldn't wonder if you would, too."

"You bet I would," I assented warmly. "I've set my heart on your making good, and if you want to keep an ace or two up your sleeve to spring when you get good and ready, I won't complain so long as you'll let me have a look at the rest of your hand once in a while."

"Good!" he cried heartily. "I'm glad to hear you talk like that. I was afraid you might get mad at me and quit, and I don't know how I could get along without you."

I assured him that he needn't worry about that.

"I intend to keep on looking over your shoulder till the last card is played," I said; "and if you need anyone to help rake in the chips or watch out for any funny business, I'll be right on deck."

He thanked me, and said that he hoped he wouldn't have to put too great a strain on my patience.

"Oh, forget it," I cut in cheerfully, my good-humour quite restored, "I'm getting all kinds of

fun out of it. Why, I haven't had such a good time since I was a kid."

"It may not be all fun before it's over," he said soberly.

"All the more reason, then," I retorted, "why I should enjoy myself while I may; and as I was always fond of fairy stories, suppose you go ahead and tell yours. You might call it——"

"A game of Blindman's Buff," he suggested, "in seven chapters entitled: 'Why I Didn't Go To Bed At All,' 'Why I Came Into Your Room,' 'Why I Screamed Like a Woman,' 'How I Knew It Was Maggie Sullivan Mrs. Bartlett Found in the Alcove,' 'Who the Mysterious Burglar Was,' 'Why I Am Sure Miss Ellis is Now Safe in Bed,' and 'What I Was Doing Myself All the Time.' How does that strike you?"

"Fine!" I replied. "Go right ahead."

"In the first place, then," he began, "I didn't go to bed because I felt sure something was going to happen to-night. Miss Ellis was so keyed-up over something at dinner that even Keaton, who isn't at all observant, noticed it. She spoke hardly a word, but it was clear to me she was in a state of high nervous tension. I thought her excitement must have something to do with the letter she got this morning, and from the curious mixture of eagerness and dread in her manner, I gathered that Mrs. Bartlett's in-

terference hadn't made her give up her intention of meeting the writer of that letter. I felt sure that somehow or other—most likely with the help of Maggie Sullivan—she'd communicated with him since then, and that she was planning to meet him after all, possibly within a few hours. That would account for her being so excited; for she must have realised that it was a crazy thing to do. I wondered what motive could be strong enough to induce her to take such risks, and I decided to find out if I could.

"That explains why I didn't go to bed—I wanted to be ready to follow her, if she went out. So after everyone had gone upstairs I locked my door and sat down with my ear to the key-hole. I sat there a long time without hearing anything, getting sleepier and sleepier every moment, till finally I must have fallen into a doze; for it came as a sharp shock to me when I realised suddenly that someone was trying the handle of my door. I ducked quietly down out of sight in case he should squint through the key-hole; but apparently he was satisfied that I'd gone to bed, for he went away immediately."

"Where to?" I asked him.

"I can't tell you that."

"Do you know who it was?"

"No, I can't say positively that I do."

"But you have an idea?"

"Yes," he admitted rather reluctantly, "but——"

"You'd rather not tell me. Never mind: go on."

"After he'd left I began to get worried for fear he might have paid you a visit while I was dozing; so I went in to see if you were all right."

"End of Chapter Two," I murmured. "Time for the plot to liven up a little."

"You're right," he said. "I'd hardly got back to my room when I heard the door into the ell open, and Maggie Sullivan came out into the hall."

I asked him how he knew it was she.

"By her walk, of course," he replied. "It's as easy to tell anyone from his walk as from his voice: it has the same individuality. The distinguishing characteristics are more marked in some cases than others, however. She has, for instance, a peculiar way of shuffling her feet which no one could mistake who had once remarked it."

"She crossed the hall," he continued, "and knocked softly on Miss Ellis' door. It was opened at once, and she went in. A moment later Miss Ellis came out alone and started downstairs. I followed her."

"Weren't you afraid of being seen?" I said.

"I had to risk that, of course," he replied; "and as I didn't know whether she carried a light or not, I waited at the head of the stairs till she reached the front door. She was quite a while getting it open—

I could hear her rapid breathing as she struggled with the heavy bolts. Finally she succeeded, and I heard her ask a question of someone outside. The reply, in a man's voice, was so indistinct that I didn't catch it; but it seemed to satisfy her, for she turned and led the way into the library.

"As soon as I heard the library door close, I stole down and crouched outside it. 'Got 'em with you?' I heard him say. She shook her head evidently; for he asked her why not. 'I wanted to make sure first that you had a right to them,' she replied. 'I ain't goin' to argue with you all night about that,' he said. 'You know as well as I do that *he* hadn't no right to them.' 'That may be true,' she returned—I could tell from her voice that she was growing a little frightened—'but I must have some proof of it before I give them to you.' 'Well, then,' he growled, 'read this.' And apparently he took a letter from his pocket and handed it to her.

"A second later I heard a stifled cry and the sound of a brief struggle. 'I guess that'll hold you for a while,' he muttered, 'long enough for him to clean up your room anyway.' I had heard a slight noise upstairs a few minutes before which I had attributed to the maid moving about. I strained my ears now to catch any further sound, and presently I heard what were unmistakably a man's footsteps overhead,

and then a faint, scraping noise as of a drawer being pulled out.

"I ran to the head of the stairs and screamed twice to wake you and Keaton up. Then I darted back again and flattened myself against the wall beside the library door just as it was thrown open and Miss Ellis' assailant rushed out. As he did so I brought the butt of my revolver down with all my might. It was a lucky blow; for it hit him squarely on the head and knocked him senseless. I dragged him into the library, closed the door, and spoke to Miss Ellis. While I was getting the handkerchief off her wrists and the gag out of her mouth, I heard you fire two shots, and then heard Keaton running downstairs and out of the house. I expected you to follow him; but as you didn't, I got Miss Ellis to help me tie the fellow's hands and feet, and then I carried him into the lavatory and turned the key on him."

"Bully for you!" I cried, jumping up and starting for the door.

"Hold on!" he said. "Where are you going?"

"Where am I going?" I repeated. "To have a look at him, of course."

"You mustn't do that," he said sharply.

"Why not?" I demanded in amazement.

"I can't tell you why."

"But, good Heavens, man!" I broke out. "What

possible objection can you have to it? I may know who he is. In fact I'm sure I do; and in any case——"

"I must trouble you to remember that I have something to say about it," he rejoined curtly, "and remind you of your promise."

"Tell me at least what the fellow looked like," I begged. "You must have learned that from Margaret. Was he rather short and thin with a pasty face, reddish hair, an ugly drooping mouth, and rabbit-coloured eyes?"

He shook his head.

"That doesn't tally at all with the description of him she gave me. She said he had black hair and a big black moustache."

I suggested that it might have been a false one.

"It was," he admitted, "and a rather poor imitation, too, I should say. What do you think?" He took the moustache out of his pocket and tossed it over to me. It was a very cheap affair: I hardly saw how it could have deceived anyone.

"His hair, though, was his own, I guess," he continued with a smile. "At any rate I couldn't get it off, and I pulled pretty hard."

"He might have dyed it," I observed hopefully, more certain than ever that it was the man in the grey felt hat. I was strongly tempted to disregard Garth's wishes and make sure; but I regretfully gave

up the idea, though I could not imagine why he was so unwilling for me to have a look at the man.

"What are you going to do with him?" I asked.

"Leave him there till morning," he replied. "It won't hurt him any. And now that I've reached the end of Chapter Seven at last," he added with another yawn, "maybe you'll let me get a little sleep?"

I reminded him that he hadn't told me yet who the mysterious burglar was, or why Mrs. Bartlett didn't want me to know it was the maid she had found in the alcove.

"What happened to her anyway?" I asked.

"Was she sand-bagged, or half strangled, or what?"

"I don't believe she was much hurt," he replied.

"Your other two questions I must leave unanswered for the present. You ought to be able to answer one of them for yourself."

"As to why Mrs. Bartlett wouldn't let me look into the alcove, you mean?"

He nodded.

"I suppose it was because she didn't want me to know that Margaret had gone out?"

"Partly that," he agreed.

I wondered what other reason there could be. Perhaps she was afraid of what the maid might say, or else she wanted to question her alone. What a fool I had been to think it simply a matter of propriety that made her so anxious to get rid of me!

I blamed myself, too, for not having followed Arthur in pursuit of the man who had dropped from the window. Single-handed he might have been no match for the fellow, and his failure to return might mean that he had been struck down, perhaps killed by the man.

"What can Keaton be doing all this time?" I enquired. "He ought to have got back long ago."

"He's still hunting for Miss Ellis, I guess. He thinks someone ran off with her, you know, and of course he won't give up searching for her until——"

A pounding on the front door interrupted him.

"That's him now!" I cried. "I'll go and let him in."

Garth got up instantly.

"I'll go with you," he said—I was surprised to note how eager he looked.

I took the candle—it had burned nearly to the socket—ran downstairs, and opened the door to find myself confronted by a very tall, broad-shouldered young man whom I had never seen before. We stood for an instant staring at one another without saying a word. Then he caught sight of Garth.

"Hello, Mr. Garth," he said. "You're Mr. Scarsden, I suppose," he added, turning to me.

I nodded.

"Well, it's a damned shame to disturb you at such an unholy hour," he went on pleasantly, "but

I forgot the key to the tower-door. I ought to have been back a lot earlier, but I got into a little game down at the village"—he smiled—"and you know what that 'just one more jack-pot' means? I thought I'd never be able to break away."

"You're Mr. Randall," I said.

He gave me a surprised glance.

"Forgot you didn't know me," he said. "I'm glad to see you're able to be about again."

I thanked him, regarding him with a good deal of interest. He had a very pleasant, boyish face, a wide humorous mouth, light blue eyes, and close-cropped, tow-coloured hair that made him look younger than his real age, which I took to be about twenty-five. I was agreeably surprised both at his appearance and his manner. He did not look at all like the usual sick man's attendant, or a servant of any kind.

"To make matters worse," he went on, "I stepped on a stone in the dark and turned my ankle. It doesn't amount to anything," he added hastily, "but I should have been here a good deal sooner otherwise."

"I'm afraid I must have brought bad luck with me," Garth said to him, smiling, "or else the place is hoodooed. First David Mears is murdered; then Mr. Scarsden is nearly killed by a burglar; and now to-night the house is entered again——"

"You don't say so!" Randall broke in. "Nobody hurt this time, I hope?"

"One of the maids got a crack on the head, but it's nothing very serious, I imagine."

"Tell me about it," he said. "How'd they get in? Who discovered 'em? Did they steal anything?"

Garth told him briefly what had happened.

"And to think I missed it all!" he exclaimed. "It's just my luck. Nothing ever happens when I'm around—wouldn't in a thousand years. Let's have a look at the chap you caught," he went on. "Hanged if I see how you managed to do it." And he looked admiringly at Garth.

To my astonishment Garth made no objection to his proposal; but turned and led the way to the lavatory. Halfway across the hall I saw something which made me cry out and dart ahead of him. The door of the lavatory stood ajar.

"He's got out!" I shouted.

It was true. He had evidently succeeded in untying his hands and unlocking the door with a skeleton-key of his own, or else his accomplice—the man I saw drop out of Margaret's window—had managed to elude Arthur, and had returned and released him.

I looked reproachfully at Garth.

"If you'd only let me come down when I wanted to——" I began.

"It's no good rubbing it in," he protested. "I'll admit it looks very much as though I'd made a fool of myself."

"Oh, I don't know about that," Randall observed consolingly. "Nobody would have supposed there was one chance in a thousand of his getting out. Too bad, though, after all the trouble you took to nab him!"

"He can't have been gone very long," I said to Randall. "I wonder you didn't meet him."

"I wish I had," he replied with a rather wry smile. "I'd have made him help me back to the house."—I had forgotten all about his ankle.

"Hurting you much?" I asked.

"Oh, no," he said cheerfully; "but I'd be much obliged if one of you would help me upstairs. Sorry to be such a confounded nuisance."

I gave him my shoulder to lean on. At the threshold of the tower-room he thanked us and bade us good-night.

"Don't bother to come in with me," he said. "I can fix it up all right myself. The old man won't be in a particularly hospitable frame of mind, I'm afraid." He grinned. "Must have slept through all the racket, I guess, or he'd have kicked up a row long before this."

A moment later we heard Jonathan Mears asking him where he had been, accompanying the en-

quiry with remarks and references which would look exceedingly out of place in print.

"He certainly has a fine command of language," I observed. "I wonder Randall doesn't bat him over the head."

Garth smiled, but said nothing.

Day was just beginning to dawn as I paused outside his door. The rumble of a farmer's wagon reached us from the road below.

"We've certainly had an exciting enough night," I said. "I shall be quite satisfied to take it easy to-morrow, though I was looking forward with a good deal of interest to seeing your prisoner. I don't wonder you felt so badly at finding him gone."

He smiled again.

"I hoped he would be," he replied; and with a cheerful "Good-night," he entered his room and closed the door, leaving me to wonder what he could possibly have meant.

CHAPTER XV

I DISOBEY ORDERS

IT was nearly noon when I woke up, feeling very much better in spite of my all but sleepless night. My first thought was of Arthur. Had he returned? And if not, what had happened to him?

I got up, slipped on my bathrobe, and rang the bell. To my surprise Maggie Sullivan answered it instead of the gawky chambermaid, who, it seemed, had been too scared by the fracas of last night to stay any longer. She had a black-and-blue spot on her left temple, but otherwise she seemed none the worse for her encounter with the burglar.

"Has Mr. Keaton returned?" I asked her.

She seemed surprised at the question.

"I didn't know he'd gone out, sir," she said.

"Has he breakfasted yet?"

"Yes, sir; he had breakfast very early before any of the others was down."

"See if he's in his room, please."

She came back and reported that he was not there. I asked her to look for him downstairs, and to tell Garth that I'd like to speak with him. She was

gone so long that I had nearly finished dressing when she returned.

"I couldn't find neither of them, sir," she said. "They ain't nowhere in the house."

"Very well," I replied, wondering where they could be. "Have some breakfast ready for me in twenty minutes. By the way," I added as she was leaving, "how is Miss Ellis this morning?"

She stared at me for an instant as though she were trying to guess how much I knew of last night's happenings.

"She ain't feelin' very well, sir," she replied at last. "She's got a bad headache."

"I'm sorry to hear that," I said. "It's a pity she should be confined to her room a fine day like this when it's so pleasant outdoors."

"Yes, sir; it does seem a pity, sir." I watched her closely, but I couldn't make out whether she was hiding anything from me or not.

"I suppose Garth could tell just from hearing her close the door," I thought when she had gone. "It must be a great thing to have ears like his." And I grunted sceptically as I started to shave.

My appetite had returned, and I ate an unusually hearty breakfast. Everything tasted extraordinarily good after the meagre fare I had had of late; and I got up from the table feeling fit for anything. I smiled as I thought how surprised Dr. Satterlee

would be to find me so much better. My legs still felt a little queer, but otherwise I was apparently all right again.

I decided I would go for a walk after I had had a look under Margaret's window and seen what traces I could find of the man who had dropped from it. But though I found two fairly plain heel-marks showing where the fellow had landed, the ground was too hard after the recent frost to reveal any further footprints. I was turning away when I saw a man coming toward me from the stable who I decided must be Dent, the new coachman. He was a short, chunkily built man of forty or thereabouts, with clear blue eyes, florid complexion, and a rather stupid but honest looking face.

"A note for you from Mr. Garth, sir," he said, touching his cap and fumbling in his coat pocket. "He told me I was to give it to you myself, sir, as soon as you come out." And he handed me an unaddressed, sealed envelope. Within was another envelope, blank also but unsealed, and a half-sheet of note-paper on which was typewritten:

"DEAR PHIL.—On no account leave the house till I return. If neither Keaton nor I show up by eight o'clock to-night, send the enclosed telegram to Stimpson. Yours in great haste,

"STEPHEN GARTH."

"Well, I'm damned!" I muttered when I had re-read the note a couple of times. What could it mean? Possibly the message to Stimpson might tell me. I opened the second envelope and read:

"Three black cats on a red-hot stove. Horses can't drag them apart without delay. Canned tongue comes high, but we must have it."

"Precisely," I thought. "I might have known it would be code-written."

Dent coughed discreetly.

"Beg pardon, sir," he said, "but I forgot to say that Mr. Garth asked me to be sure and tell you not to let nobody know you got a note from him, sir."

"He needn't have worried about that," I returned curtly. "It wouldn't have occurred to me to do so."

"No, sir," he said hastily, "of course not, sir. I trust you're feelin' quite yourself again to-day, sir." He touched his cap and turned away.

"Stop!" I cried. "I want to ask you a few questions."

He faced about.

"When did Mr. Garth give you this note?" I asked.

"About two hours ago, sir."

"Was Mr. Keaton with him?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did Mr. Garth tell you where he was going?"

"Yes, sir," he said after a moment's hesitation.

"Tell me where they went."

He hesitated again before replying, and shifted his position awkwardly.

"I'm very sorry, but I can't tell you that, sir," he stammered. "Mr. Garth told me——"

"Nonsense!" I broke in sharply. "He couldn't have meant me not to know."

He grew more embarrassed. Finally he blurted out:

"He mentioned partic'larly, sir, as I wasn't on no account to say nothin' to you about it. 'Don't tell nobody where we've gone, Dent,' he says, 'especially Mr. Scarsden.' Them were his exact words, sir, and he made me promise——"

I stopped him with a curt word of dismissal, and walked away. I felt both humiliated and angry. What could Garth be thinking of, I wondered, to tell things to a servant which he didn't want me to know? Why should he make such a mystery of the affair? It was ridiculous of him to treat me as though I were an irresponsible babbler incapable of keeping a secret. I resented it so much that I instantly determined to disregard his injunction and to spend the afternoon shooting. It was just the sort of a day for partridges, warm and still, and I

knew a spot—an old brush pile half a mile off in a clearing in the woods—where I felt sure of finding some.

It was half-past two, and already the sun was fairly low when I set out. Dent was sitting beside the stable door, polishing the brass trimming on a piece of harness. He looked very much surprised at seeing me. I even thought for an instant that he was about to remonstrate with me for going; but he merely said, "Good-afternoon, sir," and went on with his work. A moment later, however, as I turned to pick up my gun after climbing the pasture fence, I saw him hurrying toward the house; and I wondered if Garth had told him to remain on guard there in case I went out. For a moment I thought of going back; but just then I heard the distant drumming of a cock-partridge.

"I shan't be gone more than a couple of hours anyway," I thought. "Besides he had no right to expect me to stay cooped up in the house all the afternoon without even telling me why I should." And I went on.

I found the shooting even better than I had hoped for. If I had had a good dog with me, I could have bagged a dozen birds, I am sure. As it was I got five before it grew too dark to see clearly; and I returned in high spirits. As I passed the stable I looked about for Dent, but he was nowhere in sight.

Evidently he was still on guard in the house. And sure enough when I went in I saw him stretched out in a chair at the farther end of the hall.

"Well, Dent," I called out cheerfully, "I trust you've had a pleasant afternoon."

He made no reply. I chuckled.

"Come, come," I cried in a louder tone, still chuckling as I crossed the hall, "what would Mr. Garth say if he knew——"

I broke off, struck with something queer about his appearance, and hurried toward him. It was too dark for me to see his face distinctly, but as I bent over him I smelled something sickishly sweet, and I knew at once what had happened—he had been chloroformed!

I stood there for an instant, too horrified to move. Then I seized him by the shoulders and shook him roughly.

"Wake up!" I shouted. "Wake up, man!" I might as well have spoken to a corpse. His head was sunk on his chest—it wagged to and fro in an unnatural, lifeless way when I shook him; his arms dangled inertly at his sides: there was no semblance of life in him.

I opened the window and dragged the chair close to it. Then I got a bottle of whiskey from the side-board and forced some of it down his throat. It had no effect. He still lay limp and motionless, to all

appearances dead. It was minutes—minutes that seemed hours—before I was able to detect the faintest heart-beat, the least quiver of his eyelids; and it was many minutes more before I stopped plying him with whiskey and chafing his hands and wrists, and sank exhausted into a chair.

“Half an hour, perhaps fifteen minutes more, and I should have come too late!” I kept thinking. It sickened me afresh with the whole business. What was the meaning of all these tragic happenings? Who were these unknown enemies of ours? Which of us would be their next victim? I had a gloomy presentiment that we were powerless to guard against them; that despite all our precautions, they would prove too much for us; and that sooner or later there would be other deaths beside that of David Mears. I tried in vain to shake off these depressing feelings. Dent’s narrow escape had left me nervous and unstrung; and I would gladly have seized upon any pretext just then for quitting Mears House and going back to New York.

I realised suddenly that it had grown quite dark, and I got up and lighted a lamp. Dent was looking a good deal better. Quite a bit of colour had come back to his face, and his eyes had a new light in them.

“Feeling better, eh?” I asked.

He nodded.

"I'll be all right in a minute or two now, sir," he declared. "If my head didn't feel so queer——"

"Better lie still a while longer, and not try to talk," I cautioned him. "You had a pretty close call, you know, and it won't hurt you any to take it easy for a while."

He obeyed me rather reluctantly: it was plain that he was worrying over his failure to make good as a watchman, and that he was eager to tell me about it. Presently he began:

"After you left, sir, I come up to the house——"

"As Mr. Garth told you to?"

"Yes, sir, he said I should, if you went out, sir; and for me to stay here till you come back."

"What for?" I asked.

"He didn't tell me why, sir, but I kinder thought he'd a notion ther' might be somethin' wrong goin' on, sir. Leastways he wanted me to keep my eyes open, and"—he groaned—"you see what a mess I made of it, sir."

"You did the best you could, I'm sure, Dent," I said. "It wasn't your fault, I know——"

"It *was* my fault, beggin' your pardon, sir," he broke in gloomily. "I hadn't never ought to have set down here. I might have knowed I'd go to sleep—what with the warm fire, and the cup o' tea I'd had——"

"Who gave you the tea?" I interrupted.

"Nora, sir"—Nora McCarty was the name Maggie Sullivan had given as hers when she came: only Garth and I knew that it was not her right one—"I hadn't been here more'n half an hour when she brought it in to me. 'Here's somethin' to warm you up, Dent,' says she. 'I made it a-purpose for you, and I hope you'll like it.'"

"Very kind of her, I'm sure," I observed drily.

"Yes, sir; so I told her, sir," he replied.

"And you don't remember anything more after that, I suppose?"

"No, sir," he admitted shamefacedly. "I must have gone to sleep right away, I reck'n."

"Very likely," I said. "Did anything happen before that?"

"I had a bit of a row with Mr. Randall, sir. He wanted me to go and harness up the runabout for him. He said he had to go to Rockford on an errand for Mr. Mears."

"And you refused?"

"Mr. Garth told me on no account to leave the house, sir."

"What did Mr. Randall do?"

"He was pretty mad about it, sir; but finally he went and hitched up himself. I was standin' by the door when he drove by, and I seen he'd got the breechin' on all wrong, so I yelled after him, but he didn't pay no attention to me."

I asked him if he had seen anything of Margaret or Mrs. Bartlett.

"They both of them went out together not twenty minutes after you'd gone, sir," he replied.

"That left nobody in the house but you and the maids, except of course Mr. Mears?"

"No, sir."

"And you've no recollection whatever of being chloroformed?" I persisted.

He shook his head.

"Not the least, sir. I don't remember nothin' about it."

"Well," I said, "it's very strange. I should hardly have thought it possible."

"It does seem mighty queer, sir," he agreed.

I began to wonder if he had actually been chloroformed. Perhaps Maggie Sullivan had merely spilled some of it on his coat to avoid the suspicion of having put knock-out drops in his tea. I was strongly minded to hunt her up at once, and accuse her of it, but I realised that it would be a silly thing to do. I had no real proof against her; and it would only put her more on her guard and make it so much harder for Garth to trap her, if she were really guilty.

I felt sure of one thing, however—that another attempt at robbery had been made, and, I feared, a successful one. The thief or thieves had had every-

thing their own way this time, I reflected—an empty, unguarded house, and plenty of time to work in. They would have only their own stupidity to blame, if they hadn't got what they were after. I decided to look around and see what traces of them I could find.

Although he was still feeling pretty shaky, Dent insisted on going with me, and together we went through the lower rooms in the front part of the house. Nothing seemed to have been disturbed in any of them, nor could I find anything missing. Clearly it was not ordinary valuables they had been after. At Garth's suggestion Arthur had, I knew, removed the contents of David Mears' desk, with Margaret's sanction, and locked them up in his own room; so they could have stolen nothing from it. The silver in the dining-room was untouched—I heard Dent sigh with relief at that discovery—and none of the locked drawers where the smaller pieces were kept had been broken open.

"Well, Dent," I said, "I guess there's no need of your staying any longer. You'd better go back to your room and rest. I'll ring for you, if I want you."

"Very well, sir," he said. "I hope you'll find everything all right upstairs, sir, though it don't seem likely they'd go away empty-handed. I made quite sure the silver'd be missing, sir, and I can't think why it ain't."

"I wouldn't bother my head trying to, if I were you," I said. "The main thing is that it's here, every bit of it, apparently."

Then I went to the French window, and opened it.

"Off with you now," I said, smiling, "and mind you lie down for at least an hour."

He started to go: then stopped and faced me.

"I ain't thanked you yet for saving my life, sir," he began awkwardly.

"I should hope not!" I replied, "since it was my fault that it needed saving at all, if it really did. If I'd stayed at home as Mr. Garth wanted me to do, it wouldn't have; so I really owe you a vote of thanks for being so obliging as to take my place."

"It's very kind of you to say so, sir," he answered gravely; "but I want you to know that I won't forget it."

"But that's precisely what I want you to do, Dent," I expostulated. "For Heaven's sake, don't say any more about it."

"All right, sir, but if I can ever do anything——"

"Yes, yes, of course," I interrupted impatiently; "but never mind about that now. I hope you'll have a good nap," I added, "and wake up feeling as fit as ever."

"Thank you, sir," he said, "but I don't believe I need it. I'll be ready any time you want me—before eight." And he went out.

"Before eight?" I repeated to myself as I locked the window. "What did he mean by that?" I had said nothing to him of Garth's instructions to me in case he and Arthur should not have got back by then. He must have given Dent special directions which would, of course, include his telling me at last where they had gone. "At any rate," I thought, "I shan't have to wait much longer to find out." It was already after six.

I found everything in my room exactly as I had left it; and I could not see that anything had been touched in any of the other rooms—Garth's, or Arthur's, or David Mears'. Margaret had evidently returned before I did, for I could hear her moving about in her room; but I decided not to disturb her. She might resent my questioning as she had Garth's, and it was after all no affair of mine whether she had been robbed of anything or not. I was curious to learn, however, if Jonathan Mears had seen or heard anything of the burglars; and so I knocked loudly on his door, and getting no reply, I opened it part way and spoke to him.

He did not answer.

I pushed the door wide open and struck a match. My surprise at his silence instantly disappeared. He sat there tied hand and foot, with a handkerchief bound across his eyes and another stuffed into his mouth.

CHAPTER XVI

JONATHAN MEARS OFFERS A SUGGESTION

I LOST no time in freeing him.

"Ugh!" he grunted when I had got the gag out of his mouth, "you were a long while coming." He glared at me as though I had been purposely slow about it.

"Nice sort of a place this is," he went on angrily, "where a man can't take a nap in his own room in the middle of the afternoon without being waked up by someone shoving a dirty handkerchief down his throat, and finding himself blindfolded and trussed up like a damned fowl!"

I said nothing. I didn't blame him for feeling angry about it.

"I don't know why in thunder I was ever such a crazy fool as to come here anyway," he continued savagely. "A God-forsaken hole, if ever there was one—no one with any brains to talk to, nothing to do but eat and sleep and read from one day's end to another, with a blasted fool to look after me who's always off somewhere when I want him." He paused for breath.

"Heavens! I almost wish he were alive again,"

he muttered presently—and I knew he was thinking of David Mears. “It added some interest to life at any rate—gave me something to hate, and that’s better than nothing.”

I began to grow tired of his railing.

“I came here,” I said, “to see if you could tell me anything of what’s been going on in this house this afternoon. I thought, perhaps, you might have seen or heard something——”

“With my eyes blindfolded, and deaf as I am?” he interrupted sneeringly.

I had some difficulty in keeping my temper.

“Since you can’t,” I went on curtly, “I won’t trouble you any longer. Mr. Randall will no doubt be back soon.” And I turned to go.

In a twinkling his whole manner changed. Every trace of his irritation disappeared. He leaned eagerly toward me.

“What’s your hurry?” he asked. “It’s nowhere near dinner time yet surely, and that confounded man of mine may not be back for hours—he has such a plaguey mania for meeting with accidents. Sit down and stay a while, won’t you? You must make allowances for an old man’s bad temper,” he added, smiling. “It’s none too good at the best, I’m afraid, and this sort of treatment doesn’t improve it any. It wasn’t very decent of me to growl at you the way I did. I’m sorry for it.”

I sat down reluctantly, and he began to tell me more about what had happened to him. He must have been pretty sound asleep, he thought; for otherwise he didn't see how his assailants could have bound and blindfolded him without waking him up—he felt sure there had been more than one of them, though he had not heard them speak. So far as he could judge, it must have been about half-past three when he awoke, or shortly after Dent had been drugged. It made me surer than ever that Maggie Sullivan had been in league with them.

"You've had a pretty tough time of it yourself, I understand," he said when he had finished telling me of his misadventure.

I assured him that my illness hadn't really amounted to anything, and that I was feeling all right again.

"It's no joke just the same getting a crack on the head like that," he observed. "I've had more than one of them in my time, and I know what they're like. You had your nerve with you to tackle the fellow in the dark that way."

"It was a fool thing to do," I replied shortly. "I deserved what I got for trying it."

"You haven't any idea who he was, I suppose?" he asked.

I shook my head.

"Well, *I* have," he astonished me by saying. "I

may be all wrong, of course," he went on, "but it looks to me as though it must have been some old pal of his—of David's, I mean."

"That's plain enough," I returned disappointedly. "A stranger wouldn't be likely to break into the house just to steal an old letter from his desk."

"Precisely," he said.

"But it doesn't help us much to know that," I went on. "He may have had a number of old pals for all we know, any one of whom might have done it. The point is—which one?"

"If I'm not mistaken, his name is James H. Ryder," replied Jonathan Mears quietly. "He was discharged from the Plainsville Penitentiary October tenth."

I sat bolt upright in my chair, and gaped at him.

"How did you find that out?" I cried.

He seemed to enjoy my amazement.

"Well, I got to puzzling over this affair, and the more I thought of it, the more likely it seemed to me that the man who murdered him must have been some old enemy of his."

"What made you think that?" I enquired.

"The look you saw in his eyes for one thing, and the fact that he'd been scared half out of his wits for some time before his death."

"You noticed that, too?" I exclaimed.

"No one could have helped noticing it. Why,

even when he was doing his best to madden me, I've seen him break off right in the midst of his damned laughter and go white as a sheet at some little noise, and he was always looking over his shoulder as if he expected somebody to jump at him. I tell you the man went in constant fear of his life."

I made no reply: he was but echoing what I had told Arthur.

"When I heard of your mix-up with the burglar," he went on, "I was certain he'd been killed out of revenge, and by the very man who struck you down."

"But why on earth should he have come back?" I said.

"Revenge was not his only motive," he replied. "It was robbery as well. That paper you saw him hunting for——"

"Must have been an important one," I broke in, "to be worth taking such risks for." And again I was but repeating what I had thought as I watched the man in the grey felt hat through the key-hole of the library door.

"Important to him, at any rate," he agreed: "otherwise he would scarcely have ventured to come a second time for it. Your arrival the night of the murder must have prevented his getting it then."

I nodded: it seemed a very reasonable supposition.

"It was then," he said, "that I decided to tele-

graph a man named Roberts I used to know back home, and ask him if he knew of anyone that David used to be thick with, who—like myself—might not be altogether paralysed with grief at his death. He mentioned several people," he continued drily, "and added a few facts about each one which made me pick this fellow, Ryder, as being the most likely one of the lot to have done it."

"What did he tell you about him?" I asked.

"He said that Ryder had been a sort of cat's-paw for David and another man named Ellis——"

"Not Margaret's father?"

"I rather think so," he said, "though I'm not at all sure of it. It seems they got Ryder to help them in fraudulently acquiring titles to a lot of Government land"—I recalled the mass of maps and blue-prints we had found in David Mears' desk—"and when the graft was found out, they sawed it all off on him, and he got fifteen years in the pen for it."

There flashed into my mind the picture of David Mears sitting senseless in his chair, the open newspaper at his feet; and I felt sure that the item in it which had bowled him over must have had to do with Ryder's release from the penitentiary.

"By Heavens!" I cried. "I believe you're right;" and I told him of Arthur's last interview with his uncle, and of my suspicions as to what had caused

David Mears such a shock. His deep-set, little eyes sparkled with interest as he listened to me.

"If it turns out that he was in the neighbourhood at the time," I added, "the case against him will look pretty black."

"That's what you ought to find out as soon as you can," he said. "I'll write again to Roberts, if you like, and ask him to find out where Ryder went when he got out of jail. It might be a good plan, too, to put a detective on his track. It's a clue worth following up."

"I should say it was," I returned. "That was a good idea of yours, writing home. I told Arthur I thought you might be able to help us; but he said you'd been away so long you wouldn't know any more about his uncle's past than we did. It didn't occur to either of us that you might have friends there still who could give you the information we wanted."

"I don't wonder you didn't think of it," he said. "It was just a piece of good luck that Roberts hadn't died or moved somewhere else long ago." Then his face darkened, and he chuckled grimly.

"It would be rather a joke on me," he said, "if I should be the means of getting David's murderer hanged, seeing how I hated him—and do yet," he added, scowling. "If that's the case, I shall be sorry I meddled in the affair at all. If I hadn't got so

sick of sitting here day after day doing nothing, I wouldn't have stirred a finger to help you."

I wondered again at his vindictiveness.

"Surely you won't regret doing anything to bring about justice," I observed coldly.

"Justice! It's a fine word!" he cried with extraordinary bitterness. "How much justice do you think I've met with in the last forty years?—not enough so you'd notice it, I guess. And you sit there and prate to me of it," he went on angrily. "Bah! the very mention of the word sickens me. If you knew——! But, pshaw!" he broke off with one of his quick changes of expression: "it wouldn't interest you. Why should it?"—He laughed harshly. "I've been ranting away like a Methodist parson, haven't I? I don't know what's got into me lately. I'll be worse company than a scolding fish-wife before long, if I don't look out. It's sitting here alone so much that does it," he muttered. "It gets on a man's nerves, and makes him act like a fool."

He had fallen again into one of his gloomy fits, his massive shoulders hunched forward, his head sunk on his chest. There was no longer any suggestion of a great bird of prey about him—he looked more like some worn-out old beast of burden. I pitied him. His life had no doubt been a hard one, I reflected. Small wonder that the loneliness and bitterness of it

should crop out occasionally in a way to make one hate and even loathe him.

He looked up at me presently with the ghost of a smile on his face.

"Don't mind me when I talk like that," he said almost pleadingly. "I don't mean half I say. Of course I shall be glad to help you catch this man Ryder, or whoever it is that's responsible for David's death. I only wish you or Arthur or your blind friend, Mr. Garth, would drop in oftener to see me. You don't realise, perhaps, what it means to me to have someone beside Randall to talk with once in a while."

I rose and held out my hand to him. I was a good deal moved by his appeal.

"I think I understand a little at any rate," I said soberly.

His face lighted up.

"I hoped you would," he said simply as he grasped my hand.

I bade him good-night and left him. The big clock in the hall below was just striking seven as I entered my room.

CHAPTER XVII

EIGHT O'CLOCK COMES

SOMETHING happened at dinner that night of such a trivial character that it seems hardly worth mentioning; yet it played a most important part in the series of events that followed. Dinner was ordinarily at half-past six, but we waited nearly an hour for Arthur and Garth before sitting down. Both Mrs. Bartlett and Margaret were anxious to know where the two men had gone, and inclined, I could see, to doubt my professed ignorance of their whereabouts. It was not surprising that they should.

"I quite agree with you," I said when Margaret repeated that it seemed very strange they shouldn't have left word where they were going; "but as they probably expected to be back long before this, very likely they didn't think it worth while to do so."

She looked at me searchingly for an instant.

"I believe you know more about it than you are willing to tell us," she said suddenly.

"You've a perfect right to think so, of course, if you choose," I answered with what dignity I could muster.

She made no reply, but I could see she wasn't satisfied with my reply. A moment later she asked me what Dent had been doing in the house that afternoon.

"Mrs. Bartlett and I saw him sitting in the front hall when we came back from our walk. I spoke to him, but he didn't answer me. I suppose he was asleep."

"Doubtless," I said.

"But what was he doing there?" she persisted.

"How should I know?" I replied lightly. "Waiting to speak to Arthur about something, perhaps, or Mr. Randall may have rung for him."

"Was he there when you came back?" she asked.

"He was," I admitted, "and very much disturbed when I roused him to find he had been asleep. He told me he'd got tired waiting, and that the open fire must have made him drowsy." I stole a glance at Maggie Sullivan as I spoke, but her sallow face was as expressionless as ever.

"I asked you," Margaret continued, "because I missed something from my room when I returned."

"Indeed? And you think Dent took it?"

She hesitated before answering me.

"I don't like to think so," she said at last; "and yet—I don't see who else it could have been."

"Was it anything of value?" I enquired.

"Oh, no," she said hastily. "It was only an old photograph."

"I should hardly suppose Dent would have any particular craze for pictures," I observed, "but of course there's no telling—even stable boys have been known to show a fondness for photos of famous actresses and the like. I imagine, though, that the photograph you lost was not of that description?"

"It was a picture of my father," she replied.

I was so surprised that I leaned quickly back in my chair, and my elbow hit the tray on which the maid was just bringing me the coffee, and knocked it from her hands, spilling half the contents of the cup over me. I substituted a harmless "Confound it all!" for the natural expletive that rose to my lips as I sprang up and began wiping my dripping coat with a napkin.

"I'm sorry to be so clumsy," I said apologetically. Maggie Sullivan glared at me as she stooped to pick up the broken china, and Mrs. Bartlett frowned slightly; but Margaret continued to regard me as gravely as though nothing had happened.

"Bring Mr. Scarsden another cup of coffee, Nora," was all she said.

I heard something just then, however, which made me forget all about the coffee and my splashed dinner-jacket. It was the hall-clock striking eight. I stood listening to it, half expecting to hear the door-bell

ring also; for up to that moment I had felt sure Garth would be back before the time he had set. As the last stroke of the hour died away, I laid down my napkin and turned to the two women, who were looking wonderingly at me.

"I don't think I'll wait for the coffee after all," I said slowly, "if you'll excuse me." And I bowed to them and left the room.

As quickly as I could I changed my dinner clothes for the rough tweeds I had worn shooting, put a sweater on under my coat, stuffed my revolver, a box of cartridges, and another of matches in my pockets, and stole quietly down the back stairs and out to the stable. It was unlighted. I pounded on the door and shouted to Dent, but got no answer. I concluded that he had gone to the house to meet me, and that I had missed him by going out the back way; so I hurried around to the front door and rang the bell.

Margaret opened it. She started back with a cry of astonishment at seeing me.

"I thought it was Arthur," she said, her expression one of questioning bewilderment; but I was not in the mood just then to enter into explanations.

"Has Dent been here?" I asked.

"No," she replied.

"That's queer!" I muttered. "Are you sure no one has come in the front way since dinner?"

"Quite sure," she said. "I've been reading in the music room ever since then, and I should have heard the door open."

"He must be in the back part of the house, then," I said in some perplexity; for I had looked in the kitchen window on my way from the stable.

"I'll ask Nora to see," she said, but I told her I would rather go myself.

Dent was not there; nor had he come in for his dinner at all, the cook told me. I should have preferred after finding this out to slip out the back door as I had done before, and so avoid the questions which I knew Margaret was waiting to ask me; but unfortunately I had left my cap on the hat-rack in the front hall, and I did not relish the idea of going without it.

She was standing where I had left her on the threshold of the music room when I returned; and as I crossed the hall, I noted—incongruously enough—how white her throat and arms were, and how exquisitely slim and graceful she looked in her close-fitting black gown. I realised with a start that she was no longer a child. It was an odd moment for making such a discovery, but dread and anxiety had probably sharpened my perceptions.

She took a few quick steps toward me, her eyes shining with suppressed excitement.

"You didn't find him?"

I shook my head.

"He was to meet you here at eight?" she asked.

"I rather expected him to," I admitted.

"And you were going to join Arthur and Mr. Garth, weren't you?"

I said nothing.

"I thought so," she added. "Yet you told me you didn't know where they had gone."

"I don't," I said bluntly, looking straight in her eyes.

"Then how——?"

"Dent knows," I broke in; "but he had instructions not to tell anyone."

"It's very strange," she said. "I don't understand it at all. Why shouldn't Mr. Garth want you to know?"

"I've been asking myself that question all day," I replied, "and I haven't hit upon the answer yet."

She was silent for a moment. Then she said suddenly:

"There is something queer going on, something I don't understand. It frightens me."

"I don't think you need be alarmed," I said reassuringly.

"I suppose it's very silly of me, but after last night"—she drew a long breath—"I'm afraid to be left here alone with only Mrs. Bartlett and the maids. Couldn't I go with you?"

I wondered if she were in earnest.

"I know it's a very queer thing to ask," she went on hastily, the colour rising in her cheeks, "but——"

"I'd be glad to have you, of course," I said, "but I really don't see exactly——"

She interrupted me with a little laugh.

"Don't look so terribly shocked! It wouldn't be such an awful thing to do, would it?"

"You'll have to ask Mrs. Bartlett about that," I replied, smiling. "I'm afraid I'm not much of an authority upon such matters. I wasn't thinking at all of whether it would be 'proper' for you to go, but simply——"

"If I should be a bother to you?"

"If it would be wise for you to," I corrected her. "To all appearances it's as safe as a Sunday-school picnic; and yet I have a curious feeling that it might turn out—quite otherwise."

"You mean it might be actually dangerous?"

I nodded.

She looked at me incredulously for an instant.

"If that's your only reason for not wanting me to go with you, I shall get ready at once. I'm not in the least afraid." And before I could say a word she was halfway upstairs.

What I ought to have done was to have made my escape immediately. Instead of doing so I waited impatiently for her to come back, asking myself

angrily what I could have been thinking of to consider for an instant such an absurd idea as taking her with me. I would tell her plainly that it was quite impossible for me to do so, nor would I waste more precious time either in explaining why. I would merely bid her good-night and go.

My mind was resolutely made up on this point when a moment later she reappeared. She had changed her black gown for a short, dark-blue walking skirt and a soft white sweater. She wore a brown fur toque and a pair of high laced boots with ridiculously small, thick soles. It was a very becoming costume.

"I didn't keep you waiting long, did I?" she said. "I brought this with me," she added, smiling, "in case we should be attacked;" and from some invisible hiding-place she produced a tiny blue-barrelled revolver.

Then a most singular thing happened. I opened my mouth to tell her she could not go; and what I said was, opening the door for her as I spoke:

"I hope you're dressed warmly enough. We shall find it pretty cold, I'm afraid."

"I'm nearly boiling," she replied, "this sweater is frightfully thick."

I followed her out, wondering what madness possessed me. Even then it was not too late for me to assert myself and send her back.

"My dear Margaret——" I began firmly.

"What a heavenly night!" she exclaimed. "But isn't it dark? I should think so many stars ought to make more light, shouldn't you? That's Jupiter over there, isn't it? And there's the Big Dipper and the Pleiades. They're the only ones I know."—She was walking rapidly down the driveway all this time, and of course I had to keep beside her. "Do you know anything about astronomy?"

"No," I said shortly, "I don't, but I do know——"

"No one ever seems to," she broke in disappointedly, "and it would be so interesting to be able to tell which star was which."

"Extremely so," I said. "If there's one called 'The Thundering Lunatic,' I should like very much to have it pointed out to me, though I ought to be able to recognise it myself."

"Perhaps it's one of those that revolve around the moon," she suggested.

"It revolves all right, I guess," I agreed grimly—"at least I'm sure its head is full of wheels."

"And just think if it should turn out to be a shooting star—how exciting that would be!"

I felt like shaking her.

"You deserve to get hit, if it does," I declared.

"What a gallant remark!" she cried. "And I

was counting on you to protect me from all such dangers."

We came out upon the Shore Road as she spoke. Already my eyes had become used to the darkness, and I could see nearby objects with some distinctness—tumble-down stone fences, the shadowy bulks of trees and bushes, and the greyish pallor of the road itself running ghost-like past us. I stopped abruptly.

"Before we go any farther," I began, "I want to say a few things."

She turned and faced me, her eyes bright in the starlight.

"I don't think you realise," I continued gravely, "what may be the result of this—this whim of yours. You don't know what it may lead to; neither do I; but I do know that I ought never to have let you come, and I can't understand how I happened to," I added under my breath.

I thought I saw a faint smile pass swiftly over her face.

"I should never forgive myself," I went on earnestly, "if anything happened to you."

"But it won't," she objected quickly; "I'm quite sure of it. It's very nice of you to be so anxious about me, and I appreciate it very much, but as I told you before, I'm not in the least afraid, and I certainly shan't go back."

"I can't make you, of course," I answered; "but I'd feel very much better about it, if you would."

She shook her head obstinately.

"You'll think it horrid of me to insist on going with you when you don't want me; but I simply can't stand the idea of being left practically alone there. I should go crazy."

"Very well," I said. "If that's the way you feel about it, I've nothing more to say, except to hope that you may not regret it."

"Which way do we go now?" she asked.

"To the village," I replied. "I have a telegram to send."

CHAPTER XVIII

ON THE SHORE ROAD

"A TELEGRAM!" she repeated in surprise.

I saw no reason for not telling her of the note Dent had given me, and I did so as we walked briskly along.

"And you think something may have happened to them?" she asked anxiously.

"I hope not," I said, "but I can't help worrying a good deal. I'm sure Garth wouldn't have asked me to wire Stimpson, unless he was afraid they might get into trouble."

She drew a quick breath.

"Who is Stimpson—a detective?"

I nodded, wondering if I had better tell her of his visit to Mears House the day before. I decided not to.

"Have you read the telegram?" she asked.

"I'll repeat it to you, if you like," I said. "'Three black cats on a red-hot stove. Horses can't drag them apart without delay. Canned tongue comes high, but we must have it.' If you can make any sense out of it," I added, "you're a lot cleverer than I am. It's some sort of a stupid code, of course."

"I don't think so," she said after a moment's reflection. "It sounds more like a riddle."

"It's certainly crazy enough for one," I admitted. "What can 'Three black cats on a red-hot stove' mean?"

"Trouble," she replied promptly.

"Undoubtedly," I agreed, laughing; "but it isn't customary, you know, to use eight words in a telegram when one would do. If you can make any sense out of the rest of the message, I'd like to hear it."

"'Only prompt action can prevent serious disaster. Come at once and say nothing to anybody.'"

"Bully!" I exclaimed, "but confess that you drew on your imagination for all that."

"Not at all," she answered indignantly. "The second sentence about wild horses not being able to drag them apart without delay means, of course, that the case is a very desperate one, and that part about canned tongue is surely clear enough."

"I didn't find it so," I remarked humbly, wondering how near she had come to getting it right; "but perhaps that's because I never was any good at guessing things. I shall spend all my spare time after this poring over the 'Nuts to Crack' columns. But seriously," I went on, "I'd give a good deal to know where Arthur and Garth are at this moment, and to be sure they're all right."

"So would I," she said. "I feel somehow as though I were to blame for their going."

"Nonsense!" I declared. "You had nothing whatever to do with it."

"I'm not so sure of that. I have an idea——" She broke off abruptly and pointed to a vague blot on the grey surface of the road just ahead of us.

"What's that?" she cried.

"It looks like an overcoat someone's dropped, or a roll of carpet," I said hastily. "Wait here till I see."

What I found was the body of a man lying face down with both arms outstretched. I struck a match and bent over him. It was neither Garth nor Keaton, as I had feared, but a man of sixty-five or more, with thin grey hair and scraggly beard. His clothes were of cheap, coarse stuff, ill-made, and covered with grime and grease. Under his coat I caught a glimpse of a faded red jersey. He smelled strongly of whiskey.

"Another case where prohibition doesn't prohibit," I thought.

"Who is it? Is he hurt?" I turned to find Margaret at my elbow.

"Drunk, that's all," I said. "I don't know who he is—some old fisherman by his looks, I guess." I stooped down and shook him roughly.

"Wake up!" I shouted. He grunted a little,

but did not move. I seized him by the shoulders and dragged him to the side of the road.

"I suppose I'd better make sure he hasn't been run over or anything," I said, and I lighted another match. Margaret gave a little cry.

"Why, it's the man who's been bringing us lobsters lately!" she exclaimed. "He seemed like such a nice old man, too.—What did you say?"

"Nothing," I rejoined hastily. "I can't find anything the matter with him," I announced presently, "so I guess it will be all right to leave him here to sleep off the effects——"

"Leave him here—like that!"

"We can't very well take him with us, you know. If he hasn't got over it when we return——"

"I never heard of anything so inhuman," she broke in hotly. "He might die before we got back."

"There isn't the slightest danger of it," I assured her. "The kindest thing we can do is to leave the old rascal here to sleep it off." But I could not make her think so.

"You can go ahead and send your telegram, if you want to," she said. "I'll wait here for you."

"You know very well that I can't leave you alone with him. He might come to while I'm gone and murder you. Do be sensible and come along. We've wasted an awful lot of time already."

She shook her head.

"I shall stay here," she repeated. I felt again like shaking her.

"Very well," I said. "If you insist on behaving so ridiculously, I suppose we shall have to sit here till your lobster-catching friend wakes up. Then we can escort him home, make him a nice hot cup of tea, and put him comfortably to bed. It'll be a delightfully romantic ending to our little adventure. I hope you don't mind if I smoke while we're waiting?"

"Not in the least," she replied coldly.

I proceeded to fill my pipe and light it. She sat down on the low stone wall that separated the strip of grass beside us from the adjoining pasture. I sat down on the wall, too—several yards away from her. Through a swampy hollow in the pasture behind us a tiny brook gurgled softly.

Its gentle music was drowned presently by a succession of startling discords that came from the ancient and unregenerate lobster man. He had begun to snore. I have heard many people snore, but nothing to compare with him either in volume of sound, or variation in tune and pitch. It was a masterly performance—the prelude being usually a series of adagio snuffles culminating in a snort fortissimo, followed by a shrill, flute-like piping that ended in a grunt; but occasionally he improvised upon

the main theme in a way that must have made the frogs envious. We sat silent for perhaps five minutes, listening to him. Then we both burst out laughing.

"He makes such perfectly killing noises," she gasped. "Did you ever hear anything like it?"

"Never," I admitted. "I'm curious to find out what the effect would be if I poured some water down his throat. Do you suppose it would clog the works, or rust any of those little pipes?"

"Don't make me laugh any more," she pleaded breathlessly, "or I shall be too lame to move."

"Well, I'm going to try it anyway," I said. "It'll probably stop the music, but it may wake him up and let me get that telegram off sometime to-night. This old hat of his will do nicely to fetch the water in. I shan't be gone more than a minute." And I picked up the lobsterman's old sou'-wester and started down to the brook.

I was just stooping to dish up some water when I heard a scream. I was up the bank and over the wall in a twinkling. Neither Margaret nor the drunken man was there. In another second, however, I caught sight of her sitting huddled against the wall.

"What's the matter?" I cried. "Are you hurt?"

She did not answer me. An instant later I was

kneeling beside her, a lighted match in my hand, peering anxiously into her face. It was deathly white; her eyes were closed; her head had fallen sideways against one of the big boulders of the wall. She looked like a tired child asleep.

As gently as I could I put my arm about her, and laid her head on my shoulder. Then I struck another match. It showed me something I had not noticed before—the whole front of her dress had been torn open, and a thin trickle of blood was oozing from an ugly looking scratch on her throat. At sight of it I must have lost my head completely; for the next thing I knew I was kissing her tender flesh in a passion of rage and pity.

When I came to my senses, I took off my coat, made a pillow of it for her head, and darted down again to the brook. A few handfuls of the icy water dashed in her face brought her to. She opened her eyes and looked wonderingly up at me.

“What happened?” she asked faintly. “Why am I all wet this way?—I remember now,” she went on. “Someone seized me and threw me against the wall. I must have hit my head on a stone.” Then she gasped. “Why, my dress is all torn, and—and the envelope is gone!”

“You mustn’t excite yourself about it,” I said soothingly—she was trembling all over. “We shall be able to get it back for you, I’m sure. What you

must do now is to lie still and rest." But she paid no attention to me.

"Who could it have been?" she persisted.—"Not that old fisherman, surely?"

"It must have been," I replied. "He's gone anyway."

"But I don't see——"

"He was shamming," I said. "He must have known we were coming, and pretended to be drunk to get a chance to rob you. I might have known those snores were too good to be true."

"Then he isn't really a fisherman at all?"

"I'll bet he never caught a lobster in his life," I said. "It was just a clever dodge of his to disguise himself that way so he could come to the house any time he wanted to."

"But who can he be?" she demanded.

"If I'm not much mistaken," I said, "he's the man I found in the library, the man who attacked you there last night, the same man who wrote you that letter."

She shrank away from me with a little cry as though I had struck her.

"You know who it was, then, that wrote to me?" —There was a strange mingling of incredulity and dread in her voice.

"Yes," I said quietly, "I believe I do."

"And does Mr. Garth know?"

"I don't think so."

"Promise me, then, that you won't tell him," she begged.

I hesitated a moment: then I promised.

"Would you mind telling me," I asked, "why you don't want him to know?"

"I can't tell you that," she said. "Please try to believe that I have a very good reason——"

"I'm quite willing to," I interrupted quietly. "I thought, perhaps, I might be able to help you; that was why I asked."

"I wish you could!" she cried with an intensity that amazed me. "I wish there was someone—— Listen," she broke off, "I hear somebody coming."

"You must be mistaken," I was about to say when I heard the dull ring of a horse's hoofs some distance off. I guessed at once who it was.

"That must be Randall," I said. "If it is, he can take you home."

"I'd rather not go with him," she said quickly. "I don't like him."

"Then I'll ask him to let me drive you back."

"But your telegram?" she reminded me.

"I'll get him to send it first," I said. "We can wait here till he does." And I got up and went out into the middle of the road.

I was right about its being Randall. He was naturally astounded to see me, and to learn what

had happened. I told him about Garth and Arthur, and asked him if he would send the wire to Stimpson.

"Of course I will," he replied. "I hope Miss Ellis isn't much hurt, and that we shall be able to catch the fellow—he must be a damned clever scoundrel. This seems to be the very deuce of a place for queer things to happen," he went on, "and I miss 'em all, of course! It's just as I told you last night—nothing would ever happen in a thousand years when I'm around."

I told him to cheer up, that his luck might change before long.

"I don't believe it," he replied gloomily, gathering up the reins, and turning the horse around. "I'll be back inside half an hour," he added, as he drove off. I looked at my watch: it was half-past ten.

"That telegraph operator is probably in bed and asleep by this time," I thought. "I hope Randall 'll make him get up and send the message. It ought to have gone two hours ago—and would, too, if I hadn't been such a fool as to let Margaret come with me." And yet, curiously enough, I did not regret it.

"Well, that's all fixed," I said, crossing the broad strip of grass between the wall and the road, and sitting down again beside her. "It's really too bad of me, though, to keep you waiting here another half-hour just to get that telegram off."

"You forget how important it is."—I was relieved to note how much stronger her voice sounded.

"I suppose so," I said, "but it's important, too, that you shouldn't catch a bad cold."

"It would serve me right, if I did, for not taking your advice and going back when you wanted me to. It's very good of you not to be furious with me for making you so much trouble."

"Extremely so," I said. "You ought to be especially grateful to me for taking such good care of you. I think I shall style myself the Squire of Dames after this, and hire out as an escort to unprotected females—'Steady and sober middle-aged man with highest references from former patronesses. Absolute immunity from sun-stroke, chilblains, or anything except accident or violence while under his protection.'"

She laughed protestingly.

"You surely can't blame yourself for what happened to me to-night. No one could have suspected that pitiful old man of being such a monster."

"Possibly not——" I began, when I was startled by someone saying:

"Excuse me for disturbing you, but is this the way to Mears House?"

I looked up quickly and saw a man standing in the road facing us. It was too dark to see what he was like, but his voice was that of a gentleman. I

gripped the revolver in my pocket, however, as I rose and walked slowly toward him.

"Yes," I said in answer to his question, "Mears House is a little over a mile from here. Keep straight ahead till you come to a couple of big stone posts."

"Thanks," he replied courteously. "Perhaps you can tell me also if I shall find Mr. David Mears there?"

I stared at him stupidly without replying.

"It's a queer hour to make a call, I know," he went on apologetically, "but I have some very important matters to discuss with him and my time is limited."

I found my tongue at last.

"Mr. Mears," I said slowly, "has been dead nearly a week."

He took a step toward me, and thrust his head forward in an odd gesture of surprise and incredulity.

"Dead!" he exclaimed.

"I'm amazed," I said, "that you shouldn't have heard of it. It was in all the papers."

"I haven't read the papers lately," he replied. "I've been too sick."

"It seems queer they didn't tell you of it in the village."

"I haven't been in the village since I got here Friday."

"The very night David Mears—died!" I exclaimed.

"What cursed luck!" he muttered, and then in a louder tone: "If I hadn't put off going to see him till I was feeling better, I might have got my business with him all settled. As it is——"

"Possibly I can be of some assistance to you," I interrupted. "I'm staying at Mears House, and I think I can arrange an interview for you with either Mr. Mears' nephew, Mr. Keaton, or with his brother, Mr. Jonathan Mears, if you would care to have me. If you'll give me your name and address, I'll let you know."

"That's very kind of you," he replied gratefully. "I have no address just at present; but I shall be staying somewhere in the village, and I'll call at the post-office for your note."

"And to whom shall I address it?" I asked.

For the fraction of a second he seemed to hesitate. Then he said quietly:

"To James H. Ryder."

CHAPTER XIX

I PLAY THE FOOL ERRANT

THAT I did not cry out at hearing his name was simply because I was too amazed to speak. Had he told me that he was the Czar of Russia, I should have found it no harder to believe—so certain had I been of James Ryder's identity, so positive did I feel that this man could not possibly be he.

It was some seconds before I recovered sufficiently from my astonishment to realise that he had left me, and was walking slowly down the road toward the village. I hurried after him.

"Stop a minute!" I cried.

He turned around and waited for me to catch up with him.

"You must excuse my rudeness," I began, "in not saying good-night to you, but the fact is that your name rather bowled me over. It's the same as that of an old friend of mine, and it brought back recollections which made me forget my manners, I'm afraid."

"I thought you seemed a trifle upset," he replied pleasantly; "so I decided to make off without bothering you further."

Then I acted on an impulse born of a sudden, unreasoning conviction of the man's honesty.

"Mr. Ryder," I said, "I haven't been quite frank with you. I know, or think I know, who you are and what your business was with David Mears. Up to a moment ago I had believed another man to be you, and I was dazed at finding out my mistake. There are some matters connected with Mr. Mears' death," I continued, "which I should like very much to talk over with you; for I feel sure you can throw light on them. I can't tell you what they are now, but if you will come to see me in the morning——"

"I shall be very glad to," he broke in, "at any hour that is convenient."

"Good," I replied. "Suppose we say some time between ten and eleven, then?"

"That will suit me perfectly," he answered.

I took leave of him and walked slowly back to Margaret, wondering if I had not done a very foolish thing. If he had had anything to do with the murder of David Mears, I could hardly expect him to keep his appointment with me. In that case I had merely succeeded in rousing his fears, and he would doubtless lose no time in putting as many miles as possible between us; or he might remain in the neighbourhood under an assumed name—I should not be able to recognise him; for it had been too dark for me to see him clearly. I had only the vaguest notion

of what he looked like—a short, slight man of middle age with nothing distinctive about him.

And yet I did not see what else I could have done. I could scarcely have charged him outright with the murder, or insisted upon his accounting to me for his actions since his arrival. I was somewhat reassured as to the outcome of it all by my belief in his innocence, altogether groundless as that belief was.

I found Margaret very curious to learn who the man was, and why I had talked with him so long. Her astonishment when I told her was as great as my own had been.

“Did you find out if he wrote me that letter?” she asked.

“No,” I said, “it never occurred to me to ask him, but I’m positive he didn’t.”

“But it was signed with his name,” she objected, “and there were things in it that I don’t see how anyone else could have known.”

I told her that I felt sure just the same that he had had nothing to do with it.

“And you still think it was written by the man who robbed me just now?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said. “What his object was in impersonating Ryder I can’t imagine, but then I don’t know what was in the envelope.”

“Neither do I,” she replied. “My uncle”—she always called David Mears that—“gave it to me only

a day or two before I went to the Duncans. He said that it contained some very important papers, but he didn't tell me what they were. I think he was afraid someone might try to rob him of them, and that they would be safer with me.

"I didn't think any more about it," she went on, "till I got that letter from Ryder, or the man who pretended to be Ryder. In it he said——" She hesitated.

"Don't tell me," I said quickly, "if you'd rather not."

"I'll tell you this much," she said after an instant. "He accused my uncle of having done something very dishonourable—something for which this man who called himself Ryder claimed he had been unjustly imprisoned; and he said that unless I gave him the papers which he knew my uncle had entrusted to me, and which were rightfully his, he would make the whole matter public. I didn't believe a word of it, of course; but I wanted to hear what he had to say. Still, I didn't like to go to see him without speaking about it to someone first; so I went to Mrs. Bartlett and showed her the letter, and"—she caught her breath sharply—"she told me it was true."

An awkward pause followed in which I tried vainly to think of some appropriate remark.

"When I learned that," she continued, "I told her that I should give him the papers, if he had a

right to them, and he could do as he liked about the rest of it. I never saw her so angry. 'You'll do nothing of the sort!' she cried. 'Have you no regard for Mr. Mears' good name? Do you want to bring disgrace upon it, and upon yourself, too? Don't you see that was just why he gave you the papers, so Ryder couldn't prove anything against him? Now he's trying to fool you into parting with them, but you shan't do it.'

"I told her that if my uncle had wronged the man, it was my place to make him what reparation I could; but I couldn't seem to make her understand it. 'You must be crazy,' she kept saying, 'to think of doing such a thing, and you shan't leave this room till you've promised me not to.' I wouldn't promise, but of course she couldn't keep me there all day; and as soon as I got a chance I sent Nora with a note, saying that if he would come to the house late that night, I would see him. You know what happened?"

"Yes," I said, marvelling at the accuracy with which Garth had guessed her intentions, and still more puzzled as to why he had purposely given the bogus Ryder a chance to escape. Did he know who the man was? I wondered.

"I wish we knew what was in that envelope," I said. "That might explain why this man whom we both thought was Ryder went to such extraordinary

lengths to get hold of it. You say you haven't any idea what it contained? "

" Not the slightest."

I asked her if anyone had had a chance to open the envelope.

" It was locked in my trunk till yesterday," she replied, " and since then I've had it with me every moment."

" I don't see, then," I said, " how that scoundrel could possibly have known what was in it? You are sure, I suppose, that the seal hadn't been tampered with? "

" Not perfectly sure, but I don't think it had."

" Well, I give it up," I said. " Perhaps Garth will be able to explain it."

" But you promised not to say anything to him about it," she reminded me.

" Surely," I returned in some surprise, " you can't have any objections to my doing so now that we know Ryder is not the man we thought? "

" Mr. Garth was very rude to me," she said coldly. " I don't wish to be under any further obligations to him."

I said no more about it. I could hardly blame her for feeling toward him as she did. He had been a fool to treat her so cavalierly. No girl of any spirit would forgive him for having told her she lied.

It was long past the time for Randall to return, and I was growing more anxious every minute about Garth and Arthur. If they had returned, I felt sure Arthur would have come in search of us. Yet, of course, it was out of the question for me to leave Margaret and go back to the house alone; and I hid my impatience as best I could. She must have noticed it, however, for finally she suggested that we should not wait for him any longer.

"I feel quite able to walk," she declared, "and I know you must be anxious to get back."

I admitted reluctantly that I was.

She rose at once.

"Let's go, then," she said.

"If you'll promise to tell me the instant you get the least bit tired?"

"Honour bright," she replied, smiling.

I made her take my arm—solely as a necessary precaution against sun-stroke, I assured her gravely; and we started. It was still as dark as ever; but our eyes had become more used to it, so that the dusky channel of the road took clearer shape before us and we did not have to watch our steps so carefully.

We trudged on for some time, exchanging hardly a word. She seemed little inclined to talk, and I was still trying to guess who the man in the grey felt hat could be and what those papers were which

he had taken such desperate chances to secure. That they would serve to exonerate the real James Ryder I did not for an instant believe. David Mears was not the kind to be concerned over clearing another man's reputation, especially at the cost of his own; and I felt sure that he would long ago have destroyed any documents of such a character. It was more likely, I thought, that the sealed envelope contained incriminating evidence against Ryder, which he intended to use in case he was himself threatened with violence or blackmail. But I was still more inclined to think that it had nothing whatever to do with the man I had just seen; that instead it held valuable securities of one sort or another readily convertible into cash. If this were so, it was simply ready money or its equivalent that the man had been after, and he was nothing more than an unusually clever and dangerous thief, who had got Maggie Sullivan installed in the house as maid to help him.

But although there seemed ground enough for this supposition, I was convinced that greed had not been the sole motive for the robbery, that there were other motives back of it connected in some sinister fashion with the death of David Mears.

A sudden dragging on my arm cut short my reflections.

"I promised to let you know when I was getting tired," she said—and her voice sounded alarmingly

weak. "Well, I'm afraid I—I can't go much farther——"

I caught her in time to prevent her falling.

"I certainly deserve the title of Squire of Dames," I thought savagely, divided between rage at my own stupidity in not having noticed that anything was the matter with her, and admiration at her pluck in keeping on till she fainted. "A fine hero of romance I should make, first letting the heroine be robbed and nearly murdered, and then making her walk till she drops. The least I can do to make up for it is to carry her the rest of the way home."

I thought it would be easy enough; for she could not have weighed much over a hundred pounds, and I was rather proud of my strength—but I had not gone far when my heart was pounding at a great rate and my breath coming in short, quick gasps. This was, of course, simply because I had been sick in bed two days, and had nothing whatever to do with the fact that her head was resting against my cheek and that I held her warm, lithe body pressed closely against me. I assured myself almost fiercely that I should have felt the same if I had been carrying a sack of meal; and as if in derision at such a notion, the breeze blew a strand of her hair across my face and filled my nostrils with the sweet odour of it.

There was something so like an unexpected caress

about it that I stopped short, trembling all over. Then with a quick surge of my blood I strained her to me more closely, and strode on as if she were a mere feather in my arm. I whispered her name once or twice, but I was glad she did not answer me; for I feared she would have refused to let me carry her any farther, and I grudged every step of the distance I had yet to go. I did not even think how absurd it was that I, an old bachelor of nearly forty who had always prided myself on my unsusceptibility to feminine allurements, should experience such poignant pleasure at having this unconscious slip of a girl so close to me. It did not occur to me to try to analyse my emotions, to find out if I could why it was that her nearness affected me so strongly that I walked like a man in a dream, blind and deaf to all ordinary sights and sounds.

I was not even aware that someone was approaching, nor did I hear him call me by name till he had done so twice. Then I saw that it was Dent, and that he seemed very excited. Even then, however, I did not connect his coming with the disappearance of my friends, and I asked him rather blankly what he wanted.

"Mr. Keaton and Mr. Garth, sir," he stammered—"they haven't come back yet."

His words were like a dash of cold water, waking me with a start from the mental drowsiness which

the dominant grip of my emotions had brought upon me. The dumfounded look on his face at seeing Margaret in my arms helped me to realise how much more like a fool errant than a knight errant I had been acting. By some odd quirk of memory there flashed into my mind Hotspur's rebuke to his wife—"This is no time to play with mamnets or to tilt with lips"—and I seemed to see it written in his glance.

The idea of Dent's quoting Shakespeare, even dumbly, stirred me to sudden and incongruous laughter, which caused him to regard me with an expression of bewilderment akin to alarm.

"Cheer up, Dent," I said, restraining my mirth, "I haven't gone utterly mad, though I don't wonder you think so. You know, or perhaps you don't know, what Dryden or some other old party once said—'A little nonsense now and then is relished by the best of men.' What possessed me to make such a perfectly asinine remark, I can't say. Perhaps it was because I was still partly under the influence of my recent attack of giddiness."

"Yes, sir," said Dent respectfully.

"You are naturally somewhat surprised," I continued in the same strain of senseless levity, "to find me playing the Squire of Dames at such a time; but I must tell you in self-defence that the rôle was practically forced upon me: it was not of my own choosing,

you understand? Ordinarily, Dent, I am quite as incapable of behaving in such an unseemly manner as you are yourself."

"Yes, sir," he said. "I hope the young lady ain't hurt, sir."

It was Margaret herself who answered the question. She gave a startled gasp and opened her eyes.

"Put me down at once, please," she said in a distressed voice.

I obeyed. She shrank slightly away from me.

"I must have fainted again, I suppose," she said hurriedly. "I'm very sorry to have caused you so much trouble. I shouldn't have tried to walk at all."

"It was all my fault——" I began protestingly, when the sound of a horse and carriage interrupted me. The driver pulled up when he saw us.

"Hello!" he cried cheerfully—it was Randall.—
"So you got tired waiting for me. I don't blame you. I thought that confounded operator would never wake up. That you, Dent?" he broke off. "I suppose you've been having adventures, too? Everybody has 'em but me."

He jumped out and grabbed the bridle.

"Better half a ride than none," he went on, addressing me. "You drive Miss Ellis the rest of the way home, and Dent and I'll hoof it."

I helped her in, and had my foot on the step when Dent jogged my elbow.

"Will you drive back here, sir," he whispered, "as soon as you've left the young lady?"

I nodded to him and gathered up the reins.

"I'm afraid this is really the last stage of our adventure," I said sadly to Margaret when we had started, "unless the horse is obliging enough to fall down and break his neck, or we are set upon by highwaymen. Aren't you sorry?"

She made no reply.

"Well, I am anyway," I declared heartily. "I shall never forgive Dent for having cut short the best part of it."

She drew a little away from me.

"I shall be very grateful to you," she said coldly, "if you will never mention the subject to me again."

"Very well," I replied, more hurt than I could have believed possible by her tone, and wondering stupidly why she should be so offended. "I'm sorry I said it, but it's true."

She received my remark in silence, and for the remainder of the short drive neither of us spoke. Mrs. Bartlett was waiting for us at the front door, and I had hardly stopped the horse before Margaret jumped out. She did not even bid me good-night.

I turned and drove slowly back to where Dent

waited for me—thinking not of him, nor of Garth, nor of Arthur, but of a stray lock of hair which like a caress the wind had blown mockingly against my face.

CHAPTER XX

WE GO ON A VAIN QUEST

BOTH Dent and Randall were standing just where I had left them by the side of the road when I drove up. The coachman, from force of habit, I suppose, went at once to the horse's head, though the poor beast was too discouraged at being cheated out of its expected rest to need holding. Randall came straight to me.

"Dent and I have been having a row," he said, "because he won't tell me where your friends are. I made him admit that he knows, but he seems to think he would be eternally damned, if he told me. I believe he suspects me of having designs on them." He laughed pleasantly.

"Dent is extremely good at keeping secrets," I replied, "but I don't imagine he'll have any scruples about telling me. If you'll get in and take the reins, I'll speak to him."

He did so, and I jumped out and beckoned Dent aside.

"Where are they?" I asked.

"Thornton's Ledge, sir," he answered in a muffled voice.

"Thornton's Ledge!" I repeated. "What are they doing there?"

"I don't know, sir."

"For Heaven's sake, speak up!" I cried impatiently. "There's no earthly reason why Mr. Randall shouldn't know where they are, or what's happened to them. I intend to tell him anyway, so you needn't be so afraid of his hearing you."

"You'll do as you like about it, of course, sir," he rejoined uneasily, "only——"

"Only what?" I demanded.

"I don't think Mr. Garth would want you to, sir."

"Nonsense!" I said. "What possible objection could he have to Randall's knowing?"

He said nothing.

"Tell me as quickly as you can," I went on, "what's happened. Perhaps you'd better do so as we go along. We've lost time enough already."

We walked back to where Randall sat in the run-about, smoking a cigarette.

"Did you get him to divulge the momentous secret?" he asked lightly.

"Yes," I said. "They're on Thornton's Ledge."

He asked me where that was.

"It's a runt of an island off Plummer's Point about two miles from here. We ought to get there

in about half an hour. You'll come with us, I suppose?"

"Will I!" he exclaimed. "Well, I guess rather! You don't think I'm going to miss the first chance I've had to get mixed up in all this queer business—not so you'd notice it. I'm willing to bet you a box of cigars, though, that the fireworks won't go off, if I'm there: they never do."

We crowded in beside him, and Dent turned the horse about and drove past the entrance to Mears House down the Shore Road in the direction away from the village. I made him tell us as we drove along what he had been doing since he left the house.

Garth had told him, he said, to go straight to Plummer's Point, and if he didn't meet them on the way, to get a boat and row over to the ledge; but though Arthur had given him minute directions how to find the place, he had become confused in the dark, missed the trail which led through the woods to the Point, and taken another trail that brought him out finally into the road again. He wasted more time finding the right path, and when he did reach the point it was after ten o'clock. Seeing a boat drawn up on the beach, he concluded that they had returned while he was wandering around in the woods, so he went back to the house. He learned from Mrs. Bartlett that they had not got back. She told him also that Margaret and I had gone out right after

dinner, that she was afraid we had met with an accident, and made him promise to go in search of us.

"We both seem to have made a fine mess of it," I said when he had ended his story. "I don't see what they went to the island for anyway, or why they should stay there so long."

"Perhaps their boat got loose and left them marooned," Randall suggested.

"But Dent says he saw the boat," I objected.

"It may have been someone's else he saw."

"Possibly," I admitted, "but what puzzles me is why there should be a boat there at all. No one lives on the island now to my knowledge, and hasn't since old Thornton died three years ago. There's nothing but a miserable old tumble-down hut on it not fit for a dog to stay in."

Dent, who had been driving very slowly for the past few minutes and scanning the roadside with great care, brought the horse to a sudden stop.

"It's somewhere hereabouts that the path begins, sir," he said.

We jumped out and tied the horse to a tree. After poking about for a moment Dent found the trail, which was nearly hidden by a thick growth of underbrush. I didn't blame him for having missed it the first time: it was a miracle he had found it at all.

It had been dark enough in the road, but when we entered the woods we had almost to feel our way.

Clearly the path had been little used of late; for it was choked with weeds and undergrowth and blocked here and there with fallen trees and branches, so that it took us a long while to force our way through. At length the darkness began to thin perceptibly; the smell of the sea grew stronger; and shortly afterward we came out of the woods onto a rocky promontory that sloped down on one side to a little cove.

Dent, who had been leading the way, hurried down to the beach.

"The boat's here, sir," he called back. "It ain't been touched."

"Good!" I cried, hurrying after him. "But where are the oars?" I asked. They were not in the boat.

He scratched his head.

"I don't seem rightly to remember, sir," he replied, "whether I seen any."

"A lot of good the boat'll be to us without them," I said angrily. "It might just as well not be here at all."

"Maybe they're hidden somewhere about," said Randall hopefully.

"A fine chance we'll have to find them, if they are," I growled. "Still I suppose we might as well try." And we spent the next ten minutes in a fruitless search up and down the cove. Then Randall had an inspiration.

"I bet I know what he did with 'em," he said—"carried 'em with him along the path a way, and left 'em there close beside it. If we search both sides of it for a hundred yards or so, we'll find 'em sure as you live."

It proved a good suggestion; for we had not hunted long when I came upon them thrust under a bush. I gave a shout of triumph, and we hastened back to the beach. Luckily there had been hardly any wind for the past three days and the sea was unusually smooth, so that we had little difficulty launching the boat. Randall insisted upon rowing, and Dent crouched in the bow while I sat in the stern, using one of the thwarts for a rudder, and steered as straight as I could for a vague blot on the horizon which I felt sure must be Thornton's Ledge.

It took us twenty minutes to get near enough to try to make ourselves heard. Then, all together, we raised a yell which echoed over the water like an Indian war-whoop. It brought no response. We waited till we were within a few boat-lengths of the ledge and shouted again. Then, as no answer came, Randall stopped rowing, and we looked at each other questioningly.

"They can't be there," I said. "Even if they'd been sound asleep, that would have waked them. What does this mean, Dent?" I asked. "You told us they were here."

"This is where Mr. Garth said they were coming, sir."

I felt a sudden chill strike through me. Had they been lured here and murdered? I asked myself.

"Quick!" I cried to Randall.

In half a dozen strokes he had sent the nose of the boat ashore. Dent grabbed the painter and leaped out, Randall and I at his heels.

"Stay here till we come back," I said to the coachman; and an instant later I had opened the door of the shack, stepped inside, and struck a match.

It was empty. I gave a grunt of relief, but my fears were not long in returning; for if they had been done away with, I reflected, their bodies might have been thrown into the water or carried off. I lighted another match: Randall did the same; and we hunted eagerly about for any evidences of foul play.

The interior of the shack consisted of but a single room, containing beside a rickety cot-bed and a dilapidated chest of drawers, only an old, cane-bottomed chair with a great hole in it, and a small rusty stove. Beyond discovering a store of crackers, coffee, sugar, bacon, and tinned things—showing that someone had been living there recently—we found only odds and ends of rubbish. There was nothing to show that Garth and Arthur had visited the place.

"If they've actually been here," I said when we had ended our search, "which I don't more than half

believe in spite of what Dent says, it seems strange they didn't leave a note, telling us where they had gone. They must have known we should come to look for them."

"I should have thought so, too," he replied, "but maybe they counted on meeting us on their way back."

"That's what's bothering me," I rejoined. "If they got some passing fisherman to take them off, why didn't he land them at the Point?"

"It might have been too far out of his way, if he was in a hurry to get ashore."

It seemed a likely enough explanation; but for all that I could not succeed in shaking off the fear that Thornton's Ledge had been the scene of a tragedy. There was nothing to be gained, however, by our staying any longer, and we went back to the boat. I asked Dent again if there wasn't a possibility that he had been mistaken in thinking this their destination; but he refused to admit it.

"Mr. Garth told me they were comin' here, sir," he repeated stubbornly. "I couldn't have made no mistake about that."

The wind, which was blowing off-shore, had freshened considerably while we were in the shack, and we had a hard time of it getting back. After a few minutes, Randall was glad enough to let me "spell" him a while; and as Dent knew little about rowing, Randall and I took turns at the oars. Both of us

were pretty well exhausted when we reached the cove, and I was feeling so drowsy from having gone the greater part of two nights without sleep that had it not been for my anxiety, I should have thrown myself down on the beach and taken a nap.

I left the oars where I had found them under the bush, and we stumbled back along the trail to the road. And there another surprise awaited us—the horse and runabout had disappeared.

Randall greeted this discovery with a great burst of laughter. He sat down and laughed and laughed, as if the prospect of a further tramp of two miles were the funniest thing in the world.

“I don’t see where the joke comes in,” I grumbled.

“Where’s your sense of humour?” he said. “If this isn’t a horse on us!—no pun intended. We steal someone’s boat to take a row, and someone steals our horse to take a ride. Poetic justice, that’s what they call it. I was wrong after all to bet you nothing would happen if I came along. The fireworks haven’t gone off, to be sure, but everything else has—oars, friends, horse——”

An exclamation from Dent interrupted him.

“Here’s a note, sir,” he cried, “pinned to the tree.”

I struck a match and read aloud:

“Sorry, but had to have it.—Garth.”

Randall whistled.

"Cool of him, I must say," he remarked, "but maybe they'd come a long way. I was right, you see, about their getting ashore."

I was too angry to care about that. After all the trouble and anxiety I had been to on Garth's account, to have him calmly appropriate the horse and run-about in this way was like a slap in the face.

"Why the deuce," I said savagely, "couldn't he and Keaton have walked the rest of the way as well as we could?"

"It does seem a little like crowding the mourners, doesn't it?" Randall rejoined cheerfully, "but we may as well make the best of it. They say walking is fine exercise."

I merely grunted in reply, and set off for Mears House at the best pace I could.

It was nearly four o'clock when we arrived, and long before then the painful necessity of keeping awake and moving had claimed my entire attention. Somehow or other I dragged myself upstairs and across the hall to my room. Then without bothering even to take off my coat and shoes, I threw myself on the bed, and in ten seconds I was sound asleep.

CHAPTER XXI

GARTH MAKES SOME AMAZING STATEMENTS

I WAS roused several hours later by someone shaking me. It was Garth.

"Sorry to wake you," he said, "but there's a man downstairs named James Ryder waiting to see you. He's been there nearly an hour."

"Great Scott!" I exclaimed. "Is it as late as all that?"

"It's pretty nearly noon."

"And I promised to see him any time between ten and eleven!" I said, jumping up. "Will you be good enough to explain matters to him while I'm taking my bath? Tell him I'll be down as soon as I'm dressed."

"Who is this man Ryder?" Garth asked me when he came back. "You haven't mentioned him before."

"I didn't know there was such a person till last night," I retorted. "If you go chasing off to all sorts of crazy places, you must expect things to happen while you're away; and a good deal has happened, too," I added soberly.

"I rather thought there was a possibility of it,"

he remarked, "especially after we found the boat gone."

"Then you did go to Thornton's Ledge? You might have left a note there for us. Randall and I turned that old shack inside out, trying to find some traces of you."

"Randall!" he cried. "Did he go with you?"

"Yes," I replied, wondering at the sharpness of his tone. "If it hadn't been for him, we shouldn't have got there at all." And I told him of the trouble we had had finding the oars. "That was a clever idea of his to look for them along the trail, wasn't it?"

"Extremely so," he said drily. "Suppose you go ahead and tell me the rest of your adventures."

I did so.

"I'll admit," I added, "that I bungled the whole thing from start to finish. I ought never to have gone shooting; I ought not to have let Margaret go with me; I should have had sense enough to know that the old lobsterman was bluffing; I should have sent the telegram to Stimpson myself, I suppose; and I certainly ought to have brought a chain and padlock along to fasten the horse with."

The frown which had been deepening steadily on Garth's face disappeared, and he laughed good-naturedly.

"That did seem to be playing it pretty low down

on you, I confess, but it was a case of absolute necessity."

I grunted sceptically.

"You certainly succeeded in making a fine mess of the whole business," he continued; "but I don't know as you're to be blamed so very much. When a man of your age falls in love——"

"Eh?" I cried, stopping with one sleeve of my coat halfway on.

"When a man of your age falls in love," he repeated calmly, "one can't expect him to behave rationally."

"I? in love!" I exploded. "How did you get such a crazy notion as that in your head?"

"Sorry if I let the cat out of the bag before you were prepared to see it," he replied, smiling. "I forgot that Cupid's victims are always blind."

"See here, Steve——!" I began.

"Oh, we won't quarrel about it," he said cheerfully. "It's too bad it happened when it did, for it renders you quite useless for any serious occupation; but it can't be helped, and we must make the best of it."

I tried to think what I could have said to have given him such a preposterous idea. I had left out most of what took place between Margaret and myself as quite immaterial to my story—merely mentioning the bald facts of the robbery, of Ryder's appear-

ance, and of Dent's meeting us on the way back—and I had taken pains to treat the whole episode in as unromantic and matter-of-fact a way as I could.

"Of course, if you say so, that settles it," I remarked. "I beg your pardon for having seemed, momentarily, to doubt your diagnosis. I'll try my best after this to remember I'm in love. Kindly remind me, will you, if I should chance to forget it occasionally?"

"Gladly," he said, "but I don't believe there'll be much need for me to."

"I'm really curious to learn how you found it out," I went on. "Was I muttering her name in my sleep when you came in?"

"No, it was what you *didn't* tell me of your adventure of the Shore Road, and the tone of your voice when you were speaking of her that made me suspect it."

I burst out laughing.

"You know what Bill Nye said to the chap who accused him of snoring, and insisted that he heard him do so?—'Young man, you mustn't believe everything you hear.' If that's the extent of your evidence against me, I shan't worry much about it."

"I shouldn't, if I were you. You might have gone much farther and fared a great deal worse. She's a very charming girl: I hope you'll invite me to the wedding."

"I shall insist on your being best man," I replied shortly—I was growing rather tired of what I could only regard as an extremely stupid joke—"but as it will be some time yet probably before the wedding takes place, suppose we drop the subject and talk of something else. I'd like to hear what you and Arthur have been up to."

"It's quite a long story," he said, "and Mr. Ryder's patience may have limits."

"He's waited so long already," I answered, "that ten or fifteen minutes more won't make a great deal of difference to him, I guess."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"You remember how worried you were about Keaton," he began, "when he failed to come back from his pursuit of the burglar? It was about half an hour after I bade you good-night that he appeared. He'd been hunting all over the place, and had even gone halfway to the village. On his way back he saw someone at the corner of the driveway, and shouted to him, thinking it was you. The fellow took to his heels and ran down the Shore Road. Keaton ran after him, calling to him to stop. He chased him a long distance without catching up with him, and saw him leave the road finally and enter the woods. He found the trail he had taken, and followed it till he came out on the shore at a place he recognised as Plummer's Point. When he got there,

the man had disappeared, and he came to the conclusion that he had hidden himself somewhere along the path and doubled back on his tracks. After resting a while, he came back to the house.

"When he told me about it, I felt sure it was the same man that escaped from the lavatory, and that he was mistaken in thinking the fellow had dodged him in the woods. It seemed much more likely to me that he had got away in a boat. I asked Keaton if there were any place near the Point where the man might have gone, and he told me of Thornton's Ledge. 'That's where he went, then,' I said, 'as sure as you're born. If you feel up to it, we'll go to the Point and watch for him.' My idea was to hide there till he came ashore, take his boat, row out to the ledge, and see what we could find there."

"But I don't see why you took so many precautions," I interrupted—"that absurd telegram to Stimpson, your instructions to Dent, and all the rest of it. They sounded as though you expected to have a regular pitched battle with a gang of outlaws."

"Perhaps I did take rather too serious a view of it," he admitted, "but there's no harm in being prepared for emergencies, and as things turned out it was just as well that I did."

I could hardly contradict him.

"We waited at the Point till nearly five o'clock before our man appeared," he went on. "Long be-

fore then Keaton was positive I was wrong in thinking he had gone to the ledge; and when the boat was near enough for him to see who was in it, he began to laugh. 'Hanged if it isn't that poor old codger who's been bringing us lobsters!' he chuckled. —I had a hard time of it persuading him that the rascal must be disguised.

"He beached the boat and hid the oars under a bush. We waited ten minutes longer before leaving our hiding-place and starting for the ledge. By the time we got there it was almost dark."

"You must have been mad enough after all the trouble you'd gone to not to find anything in the shack but a lot of dry grub," I broke in.

Garth looked amazed.

"You don't mean to tell me you didn't discover that anything was missing?" he said.

"No, we didn't."

"You weren't at all surprised, then, to find no clothing or personal belongings of any sort there?"

"By Jove! I never thought of that," I said. "There was something else in the shack, then, when you and Arthur arrived? What was it?"

"A small wooden chest with my own initials, S. G., burned in the lid."

I thought at once of the felt hat with the same letters stamped in the sweat-band.

"What was in it?" I asked him eagerly.

"I don't know."

"You don't know!" I repeated.

"It was locked and we couldn't break it open," he explained; "so we brought it away with us."

"And that was why you took the horse?"

He nodded.

"We couldn't have carried it much farther: it was a choice between leaving it beside the road or taking the runabout."

"And you haven't opened it yet?"

"No, I thought you might like to assist at the ceremony."

I told him that I should, and asked him how they had got it ashore.

He said that after they had given up hope of Dent's coming and had resigned themselves to stay on the ledge until morning, a belated fisherman had passed within hail and taken them off; but as Randall had guessed, he had refused to go out of his way to put them ashore at the Point, and had landed them a few miles farther on.

"You must have been mighty careless about fastening the boat," I said.

"Someone came and took it while we were in the shack," he replied; "the owner of the chest, if I'm not mistaken."

I reminded him that he and Arthur had taken his boat.

"He must have had another boat hidden somewhere near," he said. "Very likely he found a handkerchief or something else one of us had dropped along the trail, which made him suspicious, and he came back. When he found the boat gone, he took the other one and rowed after us—it was dark enough so that he ran little risk of being seen—and towed our boat back with him."

"It doesn't sound very probable," I objected.

He asked me how I explained the fact of the boat's being there when Dent reached the cove.

"It may have been someone's else boat," I said.

"Which is even more improbable," he declared. "Keaton tells me that old Thornton was the only person that ever kept a boat there, and that no one uses the cove now as a landing-place—the condition of the path shows that. But that isn't the only reason why I feel practically certain that we have your drunken friend to thank for our pleasant evening on the ledge. The very fact that he was desperate enough to play such a risky game on you to get a chance to rob Miss Ellis is pretty sure proof that he knew we'd discovered his hiding-place, and that it wouldn't be safe for him to remain in the neighbourhood much longer.

"My notion is that as soon as he'd marooned us on the ledge, he made up his mind to take advantage of our absence, and the presumably unguarded con-

dition of the house, to rob her. Then when he found she'd gone out with you, he sneaked along behind till he'd made sure you were going to the village, cut around ahead of you, and—succeeded at last in getting what he has been after so persistently."

"And what the deuce *has* he been after—money?"

"I don't think so," he answered, "not in the shape of actual cash or salable securities, at any rate. I've a notion——"

"What is it?" I asked impatiently, as he paused.

"I can't tell you that now."

"Have you any idea," I persisted, "who the fellow is? I thought, of course, it was Ryder, after what the paralytic man told me, but it can't be."

"That's another question which I'd rather not answer."

"Hang it all!" I said irritably. "I don't see why you can't tell me what you think about it."

"I told you why once," he replied soberly, "and you said then——"

"That I wouldn't bother you with questions; but you promised to let me have a look at your cards once in a while, and it seems to me I'm seeing mighty few of them."

He seemed rather hurt.

"I'm sorry," he said, "that you think I'm not giving you a square deal; but there are things connected with this affair so queer that it makes me

wonder at times if I haven't let my imagination make a fool of me in the theory I've formed to account for them. However, we ought to know before long whether I'm right or not."

"I hope so, I'm sure," I grumbled, "but it doesn't seem to me we're any nearer a solution. If we'd been able to catch the man in the grey felt hat—or rather to keep him after you'd caught him—we'd have accomplished something; but now that he's got what he was after, we shan't see any more of him, that's certain."

"I wouldn't be too sure of it," he remarked quietly. "I expect him to pay us another visit to-night."

"What!" I cried. "You mean he's coming back to steal something else?"

"I didn't say so," he replied. "I merely said that I expected him to pay us another visit."

"Of a purely social character, I suppose? Or perhaps he's coming to give Margaret back those papers he stole from her."

He smiled enigmatically.

"Don't you think you've kept Mr. Ryder waiting about long enough?" he enquired.

I sprang up.

"I'd forgotten all about him," I said. "Come down with me and hear what he has to say."

CHAPTER XXII

WE HIRE A BUTLER

OUR talk with James Ryder was an extremely interesting one. He told us a great deal about David Mears, and among other things his reason for leaving Mansfield. This was due, he said, to the bitter feeling against him resulting from common knowledge of the fact that he and his partner, Robert Ellis—Margaret's father—were in reality guilty of the land frauds for which Ryder had been sentenced to fifteen years in the penitentiary.

Ellis, it seems, had been so affected by the hostile sentiment that he had shot himself within a year, leaving his four-year-old daughter to the care of David Mears. It was, he thought, chiefly for the sake of sparing her the knowledge of her father's disgrace, and to shield her from the unpleasant consequences sure to arise from it as she grew older, that David Mears had left Mansfield and gone to New York. Of his life there he could tell us very little. He had heard vague rumours of some shady transactions in which he had been involved and of his having lost a good deal of money speculating, and he imagined that these things might have had much

to do with his settling in such an out-of-the-way spot as Mears House.

I had expected that Ryder would show some bitterness and animosity toward the dead man—it would have been only natural that he should have; but his was apparently one of those natures in which time lessens instead of increases the desire for revenge; for there was nothing in the way he spoke of the man who had wronged him so deeply to show that he cherished the least resentment. He was quite frank, however, in admitting that he had told David Mears that he would hunt him up and kill him as soon as he got out of jail, and that he firmly intended to do so.

“For a long while,” he said, “I used to count the weeks before I should be free to carry out my threat; but later I came to see things differently. It didn’t seem worth while to spend the rest of my life in prison, or to be hanged or electrocuted, just for the sake of settling an old grudge. I was determined, though, to make him right the wrong he’d done me, in a measure at least, by clearing my name. It was for that purpose I came here; but unless he left certain private memoranda—which he probably destroyed long ago—among his papers, I’ve come too late.”

“It was a pity you weren’t able to call on him the day you arrived,” said Garth. “I understand

from Mr. Scarsden that you were taken sick shortly after you got here, and that you've been laid up ever since."

"Yes," he said.

"Would you mind telling us where you've been?" Garth asked him.

"At a farm-house some four or five miles from here."

"And you went there as soon as you reached Shelburne?"

Ryder hesitated an instant before replying.

"I started to come directly here," he said, "but I was taken suddenly ill on the road, and a farmer passing by helped me into his wagon and took me home with him."

"That was early Friday afternoon?"

"Yes."

I could see that he was beginning to resent being questioned so persistently, and that it seemed to be getting on his nerves. There was something in his manner, too, which made me suspect that he was hiding something from us. It set me to wondering if he were really as straightforward and honest as I had thought him.

"Then the man who played the Good Samaritan toward you was not Mr. Gideon Sparks?" Garth enquired sharply.

Ryder leaped halfway out of his chair.

"How did you know who it was?" he cried, fear as well as surprise in his voice.

"That doesn't matter," Garth returned. "What does matter is that you have lied to us about your actions. Your object in doing so I won't pretend to state, but it seems to me you'd do well to realise that it places you in a rather unenviable position."

"You think I killed him!" exclaimed Ryder excitedly. "You think that?"

"It makes no difference what I think," said Garth curtly. "What we're after is the truth. I would suggest that you bear that in mind, and tell us what you actually did that afternoon—and night."

His voice was stern, almost threatening. Ryder seemed to shrink at the sound of it, and his pale face grew a shade whiter; but when he spoke I could detect none of the former nervousness and dread in his voice.

"I was a fool," he said, "not to be quite frank with you; but I was afraid if I told you the actual facts, you wouldn't believe me, and that if you knew where I'd been, you'd be sure I killed him."

"Then you were here the night David Mears was murdered?" I broke in.

"Yes," he said, "I was here, on the grounds, within fifty yards or so of the house all the evening."

"You must have seen me or heard me, then, when I came. I made racket enough trying to get in."

He shook his head.

"I didn't see or hear anyone," he replied. "I was lying in a faint the whole time. It sounds incredible, I know. That's why I kept quiet about it.

"I reached Shelburne about two o'clock Friday afternoon," he continued. "I was feeling pretty well done-up—I'd been under the weather for a couple of days; but I decided to try to walk here, sick as I was. It took me nearly five hours to do it. Every little while I had to stop to rest, and twice I fainted dead away. My head was swimming so the last half-mile that I hardly knew where I was going. When I got almost up to the house I had another dizzy spell, and I wandered off the drive and sat down.

"The next thing I remember was waking up, shivering with chills and fever. I looked at my watch: it was half-past one. I got up and started to walk back to the village. How far I got before I fainted again, I don't know. It was light when I woke up and found a man bending over me, asking me something. He helped me into his wagon and took me home with him. I was out of my head most of the time for the next two days: then I had a rapid turn for the better, and day before yesterday I was able to get up. I wanted Mr. Sparks to take me to the village with him yesterday afternoon; but he insisted that I wasn't well enough to go, and that I

must stay there till I got stronger; but I was impatient to see Mr. Mears, so I stole out of the house after supper without either he or his wife seeing me. I took the wrong branch where the road forked and came a good bit out of my way. Then I saw Mr. Scarsden.

“When he told me Mr. Mears was dead, it struck me all of a heap; and when I found that he’d been killed—for I guessed by the way he spoke he hadn’t died a natural death—on the very night I arrived, I saw at once how black the case would look against me if it were known I’d been here. If I hadn’t been afraid of exciting suspicion, I’d have cleared out at once—I came near doing so as it was—but I decided finally it would be better for me to see him and say nothing of where I’d been. That, gentlemen, is the truth of the whole matter. You can believe it or not as you like.”

But for the fact that Ryder had lied to us in the first place, I should have been strongly inclined to credit his story, improbable as it sounded; for he had told it without the least hesitancy or apparent equivocation; but when I recalled the circumstances and the motive he had had to commit the crime, I did not know what to think. It was Garth who broke the silence.

“I believe your story, Mr. Ryder,” he said gravely, “but as my chief reason for doing so is one that

wouldn't have the slightest weight with any jury in the country, I should feel scarcely justified in expecting others to believe it without further proof of its truth; and so far as I can see it will be impossible for you to produce that proof."

Ryder assented soberly.

"Such being the case," Garth continued, "I suggest that you remain here until the actual murderer is found."

Both Ryder and I looked at him in amazement. He seemed aware of it, for he went on drily:

"Of course I don't mean that Mr. Ryder should spend the rest of his life here. If we don't succeed in clearing up the matter within—another fortnight, say, there will be no object in his staying any longer."

I could not help wondering whether he meant by that to imply that before then Ryder might expect to find himself wearing prison garb again, or being measured for it at any rate; or if he felt confident within that time of bringing the murder home to someone else.

"I'm perfectly willing to remain here, of course, if you wish me to," Ryder answered; "but it strikes me that it may be rather an awkward matter to arrange. Possibly Mr. Keaton——"

"There'll be no difficulty about it, I think," Garth interrupted. "I'll explain the situation to him, and I'm sure he'll agree with me that it's best. I should

prefer," he added, "that no one else knows who you are, or why you are here. Perhaps"—he hesitated a trifle—"you'd have no great objection to playing the part of a servant for so short a time?"

"I'd much prefer to," returned Ryder quickly. "I don't care to be an object of charity, if you can call it that."

"Could you fill the rôle of butler, do you think?" Garth asked him.

A faint smile crossed Ryder's face.

"I ought to be able to," he said. "I've been doing it for the warden for the last five years."

"Good!" Garth cried. "That's a splendid way out of the difficulty. We need someone who can be trusted to wait on the table properly, too," he added. "Our present waitress is altogether too fond of flavouring things to suit her own taste. I smelt that stain on your dinner coat the instant I came into your room," he told me later. "It was lucky you took that cup of coffee externally instead of internally. She put the same sort of stuff into it, I guess, that she did into Dent's tea."

Then he asked me if I would find Keaton and bring him back with me.

I found Arthur just leaving his room, and told him of my meeting with Ryder the night before, of the damaging admissions we had got from him regarding his whereabouts the night of the murder, and of

Garth's suggestion that he remain with us as butler for the present.

"It seems an extraordinary thing to do," he remarked, frowning, "to employ a man to wait on you who may have killed your own uncle; but if Garth is so set on my doing so, I can't very well refuse."

I introduced him to Ryder, and Garth explained his reasons for wishing Ryder to stay, repeating his desire that no one but ourselves should know who he really was. Arthur agreed readily enough to the plan. One glance at Ryder—whose scanty grey hair, faded blue eyes, shrunken figure, and thin white face made him look more like some pious old sexton than a discharged convict and suspected murderer—had evidently set at rest any doubts that my words may have raised in his mind as to the wisdom of such a proceeding.

As our new butler had no clothes suitable to the part he was to play, Garth gave him money to buy some at the village, and asked him to hurry back as soon as he had got them.

"By the way," he added as Ryder was leaving, "there's one other question I'd like to ask you—can you wear a number eight-and-a-half shoe?"

Arthur and I saw at once, of course, what he was driving at, but evidently Ryder did not, for he looked very much surprised.

"Why, yes," he replied, "that's the very size I wear."

I glanced quickly at his feet, and noted with somewhat of a shock that the shoes he had on were almost identical in shape with those David Mears had worn the night of his death. I spoke of it as soon as he had gone.

"The circumstantial evidence against him is certainly piling up," Garth observed, smiling. Then he continued soberly: "It's just such ridiculous, meaningless coincidences as that which send heaps of innocent men to the gallows."

"I suppose so," I said; but despite his refusal to attach any importance to the discovery, the fact that the shoes which Ryder wore would, I felt sure, have fitted exactly in the footprints Arthur and I had found leading to the cliff, went far to shake my growing belief in the man's innocence. Whether Arthur shared this feeling or not I had no chance to find out, for just then Maggie Sullivan knocked on the door and announced luncheon.

"I was about to propose that we have a look at the contents of the mysterious chest," Garth said, "but we shall have to put off opening it until later."

CHAPTER XXIII

MRS. BARTLETT PUTS HER FOOT DOWN

"THAT'S everything there is in it," I said, throwing a disgusted look at the heap of old clothes, shoes, dirty linen, cheap haberdashery, and paper-covered novels I had taken from the chest Garth had brought back with him from Thornton's Ledge. "There isn't a thing here," I went on, "to show who the owner of this precious truck is. Rather tough on you and Arthur after all the trouble you took to bring it back with you."

"Fortunes of war, my dear fellow," he said cheerfully. "It was worth taking a chance on. Your friend of the grey felt hat must be a very crafty sort to take such unusual precautions against visitors. Sign of a guilty conscience, I'm afraid."

I said nothing, but began to tumble the things back in the chest. I had just finished doing so when someone knocked.

"Come in, Mrs. Bartlett," Garth called out. "I hope you didn't get a bad fall," he added, as she entered. "It was you, wasn't it, I heard tumble down a few minutes ago?"

"It was," she admitted, "but I didn't think I made noise enough for you to hear me. You must have very sharp ears."

"I have," he said, smiling. "Everything has its compensations, you know."

She sniffed.

"If there's any compensations for the goings-on here this last week, I'd like to know what they are. It's about them I came to speak to you."

"I shall be very glad to hear what you have to say," he rejoined. "Won't you sit down?"

Mrs. Bartlett did so and began to air her grievances. She talked for quite five minutes without once stopping to take breath, or paying the slightest attention to the occasional questions we asked her. Before she had been speaking long we both realised the futility of trying to stem that torrential flow of words, which poured forth as from the proverbial vials of wrath. To give an accurate transcript of half she said is beyond my power—there would be no object in doing so, if I could; for most of her harangue concerned matters of which the reader has already been told. What little new there was in it had mostly to do with Maggie Sullivan, whose behaviour had apparently strained Mrs. Bartlett's patience perilously near the breaking-point. Nor did I wonder that she should object so strongly to such "crazy carryings-on"; for they would have called

forth a protest from a much less strict and particular person than she.

It seems she had had occasion to speak to Maggie Sullivan—or Nora as she called her—about something quite late at night soon after her arrival; and not finding her in her room, she asked her the next morning where she had been. She had intimated that it was none of Mrs. Bartlett's business, that she had a perfect right to go out when she chose and to be gone as long as she pleased. It was on the tip of Mrs. Bartlett's tongue to tell her to pack up her things and leave; but she remembered how hard it had become to get servants to stay, so she contented herself with giving her a sharp scolding and forbade her to be out so late again. Maggie Sullivan had smiled impudently, as if to imply that she cared nothing for her orders; and this had angered the housekeeper so much that she determined to keep a strict watch on her.

So she sat up the next night—the night Margaret's room had been entered—and about ten o'clock saw the maid steal past her door and go downstairs. Mrs. Bartlett followed her; but by the time she had reached the door she had disappeared, so she returned to her room and waited for her to come back. She supposed she must have gone to sleep—though she felt sure she hadn't; for it seemed to her that she was wide awake when she heard the screams and then

the shots I had fired out of Margaret's window. Her surprise at finding Maggie Sullivan in the alcove may be guessed, as well as her indignation when the maid refused to admit that she had been out of the house at all. Miss Ellis, she said, had told her to come to her room at half-past eleven. She remembered nothing after that. She ended by giving Mrs. Bartlett a fortnight's notice, saying she wouldn't stay any longer in a house where such things were going on, and where she was spied upon and suspected of all sorts of shameful doings.

Mrs. Bartlett was glad enough to have her give notice; but though she made up her mind to put up with her insolence and queer behaviour till another maid could be engaged to take her place, she didn't feel easy to have such a woman in the house, and so she kept her eyes open to see what further tricks she would be up to. She had noticed that Maggie Sullivan seemed to be "mighty thick" with the old man who brought fish and lobsters; but she was more concerned over a habit she had of listening at key-holes. Twice she had caught her at it—once when Garth was questioning the man Stimpson had brought, and again at the door of the tower-room when Jonathan Mears and Randall were talking.

On going out to the stable at dinner-time the night before to speak to Dent about bringing in some firewood, she had seen Maggie Sullivan some distance

away from the house talking to a man whom she recognised as the old fisherman. As she hadn't ordered anything of him that day, it aroused her suspicions to have him hanging about, and she tried to get near enough to overhear what they were saying; but they saw her, and he hurried down the driveway. Maggie Sullivan came straight toward her. She was "spitting mad," as Mrs. Bartlett expressed it. "Up to your old tricks, eh?" she sneered. "Can't even have a little talk with old Mr. Simonton without your comin' snoopin' round." Mrs. Bartlett kept her temper, and said nothing except to order her back to the house. She disappeared again almost as soon as dinner was over, and didn't return till after midnight.

"And I just came to tell you," Mrs. Bartlett ended, "that I won't put up with her any longer. I've been disobeyed and laughed at by the creature as long as I'm going to be. Either she leaves the house or I do, there's no two ways about it."

"She shall be sent off to-morrow, Mrs. Bartlett, I promise you," Garth said. "It's been very good of you to put up with her so long."

She sniffed again, as though to imply that she was not asking for compliments on her forbearance.

"What's this Mr. Keaton tells me about his having hired a butler?" she snapped—"some sort of a tramp who came begging for a bite to eat and don't

know no more about waiting on the table, I expect, than the man in the moon, if he don't turn out to be an ex-convict who'll murder us all in our beds."

"I wouldn't worry about that, if I were you," he assured her. "The man comes very well recommended. He served fifteen years in his last place, and they'd have been glad to have kept him longer, but he found his duties rather too confining."

"H-m," she said. "Well, he can't be any worse than her, that's one comfort." With which optimistic remark she left us.

"Our friend, Maggie, seems to have been making herself popular all around," Garth observed. "It's about time to call a halt on her activities, I guess, or she'll end by becoming a nuisance."

I quite agreed with him, though I had hoped we should be able to catch her doing something which would have warranted us in lodging a complaint against her with the village authorities, and having her locked up in jail for a while. I suggested this to Garth, but he seemed to think we should have difficulty in proving anything against her.

"By the way," I said a moment later, "isn't it about time Ryder was back? He's been gone long enough to buy a dozen suits of clothes."

"I shan't be much surprised if he doesn't come back," he said.

"You mean he may be guilty after all, and that

he'll use the money you gave him to escape with?"

"Oh, no," he replied. "I'm quite sure he had nothing to do with the murder, but there's a possibility that something may happen to prevent his return."

"Good Heavens!" I cried. "Has it come to the point where a man can't go to the village in broad daylight without being waylaid and killed?"

"Whose imagination is getting the better of him now?" he enquired, smiling. "I didn't intend to scare you into thinking that anything so horrible as that was likely to happen. There are plenty of other things that might prevent his coming back."

"I suppose there are," I said, "but I don't see what object anyone could have in hindering his return."

"It isn't very obvious, I admit," he answered; and that was all he would say about it.

I asked him when he expected Stimpson to arrive.

"I don't expect him at all," he told me.

"But that idiotic telegram? Wasn't that to tell him to come?"

He shook his head.

"Oh, no, that was merely a blind."

"If I'd known that," I replied shortly, "I wouldn't have lost a good night's sleep trying to send it. I suppose you won't tell me what the message was?"

"I'm afraid I can't just now."

"Oh, very well," I grumbled. "Suit yourself about it. I'm going for a walk," I added, rising—"that is, if you think it's safe for me to do so."

"Perfectly," he said gravely, "so long as you keep out of the way of Keaton and Miss Ellis."—They had gone out together soon after luncheon.

I glared at him and left the room without replying.

"As if it made a particle of difference to me whether she goes walking with him or not," I thought angrily, as I strode along the path bordering the cliffs. I wondered again how he could be so stupid as to think I was in love with her, when on the contrary I felt distinctly annoyed at her for not having bidden me good-night the evening before, and quite ashamed of my brief fit of sentimental weakness on the Shore Road. If there had been a moon, I should have laid it to that. As it was I set it down entirely to the fact that I was still a little light-headed after my fever. It would be a warning to me not to let my emotions get the better of my common-sense again. I would take pains to show her the first possible chance that I regretted the whole episode as much as she did, and that I was far from being the romantic, love-struck individual that Garth—and possibly she herself—thought me.

As I made this resolve I came face to face with her at a sharp turn in the path. She was alone,

and I saw to my surprise that she had been crying.

"Is anything the matter?" I asked stiffly. "I thought Arthur came with you."

"Nothing," she said coldly. "He—went back another way."

I stood aside to let her pass. She looked at me rather oddly for an instant: then to my amazement she began to laugh, a little hysterically, I thought.

"Men are such queer creatures," she murmured.

"More so than girls?" I said.

"Perhaps not, on the whole," she admitted, "but in such different ways."

"For example?" I said.

"No girl would ever ask a man to marry her more than once."

"That shows you don't read the papers carefully," I retorted. "There was a case reported only the other day of a woman remarrying a man she had already been divorced from twice. It happened in Chicago, it's true——"

"You know perfectly well I didn't mean that," she interrupted. "I meant that no girl would ask a man more than once to marry her."

"Women are proverbial for their caution," I observed. "She'd be dead sure, of course, before she asked him that there wasn't one chance in a thousand of her being turned down."

"Very likely, but that doesn't make it any the

less true that she has too much pride to go on proposing time after time."

I was about to tell her that persistence was a very admirable quality, when I remembered my resolve. It would never do to let her make the mistake of thinking that I was the least bit interested in such matters. This was a good opportunity to disabuse her mind of any such ridiculous notion, if she had it.

"Of course an old bachelor like myself takes only an academic interest in such questions," I went on lightly; "but the very fact that I have passed the age when one thinks of marrying should make me a better judge of them. Whenever the personal equation enters in, you know, it's very hard to form an unprejudiced opinion."

I flattered myself that was very neatly expressed. I had made it quite plain to her that my somewhat extraordinary actions of the night before were entirely foreign to my real character. It mystified me a good deal, therefore, when she said musingly:

"I never knew before that you wore a wig."

"In certain instances," I replied severely, "persons have been known to retain their hair to a great age, also their teeth, and——"

"Their manners, you were going to say?"

"It's customary, I believe, in good society to bid people good-night——"

"Especially when you've forced yourself on them

all the evening." Her tone made me sorry for what I'd said. I was on the point of apologising when she added quietly: "I thought you'd had such an amusing time you wouldn't care whether I said good-night or not." And before I could reply, she had taken leave of me and set off toward the house.

For an instant I thought of hurrying after her and telling her how hurt I had been by her action, but I recollected in time that it would hardly be consistent with my resolve; so I walked on, feeling strangely dissatisfied with my attempt to vindicate myself.

It was growing dark when I reached the house. In the hall I came upon Mrs. Bartlett.

"She's gone," she announced.

"Gone!" I repeated. "But I met her only a little while ago, and she said nothing about going anywhere."

"You met her!" she exclaimed. "Where, I should like to know?"

"About half a mile from here on the cliff path."

"Who are you talking about?" she demanded.

"Margaret, of course," I returned impatiently.

"I wasn't speaking of her: I meant Nora."

"Oh," I said, angry to find myself reddening under her glance, "I beg your pardon."

She regarded me grimly for a moment: then she said:

"I feel it my duty to tell you, Mr. Scarsden, that

I don't approve at all of—what happened last night. If Margaret had asked me, I should have forbidden her to go with you."

"I wish you had," I said. "I did my best to prevent her going."

"Indeed?" she remarked drily. "Well, I trust it won't occur again. Since Mr. Mears' death I feel responsible for her actions; and it isn't at all proper for her to do such things; you must realise that."

"Quite so," I murmured. "I shall do my best, I promise you, to prevent anything of the sort happening again. And so Nora has gone, has she?" I went on hastily. "Any special reason for her sudden departure?"

"She called me a meddling old fool," Mrs. Bartlett replied stiffly.

"Dear me!" I said. "What did you do to call forth such an unkind and libellous remark as that?"

"I caught her talking again with that good-for-nothing old reprobate——"

"Not the man in the grey felt hat!"

"I never noticed what sort of a hat he wears," she said.

"The old fisherman, I mean," I explained.

She nodded.

"He came here to the house?" I asked incredulously.

"No," she said. "She went down through the pasture-lot toward that clump of scrub-oaks to meet him."

I asked her if she were sure it was he.

"I can't say positively that I am," she answered, "but I guess there ain't much doubt about it, though for all I know she may have been carrying on with every Tom, Dick, and Harry in the neighbourhood. It wouldn't surprise me in the least."

"You asked her, I suppose, what she was doing?"

"She didn't give me a chance. As soon as ever she saw me she began calling me names, and I told her to pack up her things and get out as quick as she could. Dent's just taken her to the village. I was never so glad to get rid of anyone in all my life. If ever there was an impertinent, aggravating——"

She was interrupted by Arthur coming in. He looked very much disturbed about something.

"I'd like a word with you, Phil," he said, and led the way into the library.

CHAPTER XXIV

I MAKE A PROMISE AND BREAK IT

"WHAT is it?" I said, closing the door and facing him.

"I'm going away for a while," he replied.

"Why?" I asked.

"Because I can't stand it here any longer. This thing has got on my nerves: it's wearing me out. I need rest, change——"

"Nonsense!" I said. "I know what's the matter with you," I went on bluntly. "You're worrying yourself sick because Margaret won't promise to marry you. I knew right off you'd been asking her to when I met her just now coming back alone. Take my advice and quit bothering about it. Girls of her age aren't in any hurry to get married; they want a few more years of freedom first. All you need is a little patience."

"A lot you know about it!" he exclaimed.

"I expected you to tell me that," I rejoined. "It's what lovers always say, I believe, when one gives them good advice. They seem to think there's no general rule that fits their particular case, when as a matter of fact they're all as much alike as peas in a

pod. Margaret and you are both very normal persons. Given a sufficient number of tastes in common—which you have—propinquity, aided by mother nature, will do the rest. Sooner or later you'll inevitably marry: there isn't the slightest doubt of it. And such being the case——"

"You talk like a damned fool," he broke in irritably.

"You're quite welcome to think so," I said, "if it gives you any satisfaction; but I hope you'll change your mind about going away just now, for it'll be rather awkward for Garth and I to stay on here without you."

"I don't see why," he objected. "I shan't be gone more than a week."

"Suppose anything happens while you're away?"

"To Margaret, you mean?"

"To any of us," I said. "Really I think you ought to stay till we've cleared up the mystery of your uncle's death."

He made an impatient gesture.

"It may never be cleared up," he returned. "There doesn't seem to be any immediate prospect of it, you'll admit. I can't see that Garth has accomplished a thing so far."

"He may have something up his sleeve that we know nothing about," I urged. "I don't believe he's been here this long without finding out a good deal,

though he's so infernally close-mouthed I can't get a word out of him."

"I don't believe he knows a bit more about it than we do."

"All the more reason, then," I declared, "why you should stay and help clear the matter up." But though I spent the greater part of an hour arguing with him, I could not shake his determination to go. Margaret and he must have had a real lovers' quarrel, I decided, and he was foolishly bent on not seeing her again till she had had time to regret her part in it. Doubtless he thought he was doing a wise thing in going away for a time; but if I had been in his place, I am sure I should have acted differently. Running away always struck me as a silly proceeding under any circumstances.

Dinner-time came without bringing our new butler, and we had to do as best we could with no one to wait on us. I could not see that Margaret seemed to mind Arthur's going, though she was not the sort of girl to show it, if she had. I doubted very much if it had improved his chances any. She would be more likely, I thought, to resent it as a palpable attempt to make her feel sorry, or else she would regard it with the same sort of tolerant amusement that one does the sulkiness of a spoiled child.

Maggie Sullivan's departure didn't seem to surprise Garth much.

"I hope we've seen the last of her," he remarked later as we sat smoking together in my room. "She's a very trying person to have around."

"On account of her fondness for doctoring other people's drinks, you mean?"

"Not altogether that," he replied, "but her going makes things a good deal easier."

"It will certainly be a relief to Mrs. Bartlett," I agreed.

"Not alone to her," he said.

"So you've been keeping tabs on her actions, too, have you?"

"That's about all I have been doing," he rejoined.

"Then you knew all along what Mrs. Bartlett told us about her?"

He nodded.

"As a matter of fact she didn't find out half she's been up to. She said nothing, you'll remember, of her rifling the trunk in which Keaton locked up the contents of David Mears' desk, or of her entering Mrs. Bartlett's own room and going through her things. She didn't even hear her open the mysterious chest this morning——"

"Great Scott!" I broke in, "if she's been up to all that mischief, why did you let her get away? Why didn't you have her arrested long ago?"

"I hope to show you why very shortly," he said, "and when the time comes," he continued earnestly,

"I want you to do exactly as I tell you without an instant's hesitation. If you should fail to——"

"You needn't worry about that," I said rather stiffly. "I won't, I promise you."

"Remember that promise," he said gravely. "A great deal may depend on it. You'd better lie down now and get a little sleep."

"Sleep!" I exclaimed.

"Well, if you won't take a nap, I will," he rejoined. "The man in the grey felt hat isn't likely to make his appearance for a couple of hours yet. If he does, you can wake me." And he was soon fast asleep in his chair.

I relighted my pipe and picked up a book, but I was in no mood to read. My imagination was too busy trying to discover the explanation of Garth's irritating secrecy concerning the whole affair—his unwillingness to interfere with Maggie Sullivan's actions, his reasons for thinking Ryder might not return, his confidence that the man who had robbed Margaret would pay us another visit that very night—above all for his guarded intimation that we were soon to find David Mears' murderer.

The minutes flew by while I speculated on these things. I heard the hall clock strike ten, then eleven. The stillness of the silent house began to oppress me, causing me to picture all sorts of gruesome endings to our forthcoming adventure. I realised sud-

denly that the room was growing cold, and I rose to replenish the fire.

As I was doing so, two shots rang out in the tower-room. I dropped the stick of wood in my hand and turned excitedly to Garth. He was already on his feet, and I saw him hurry to the window and pull up the shade.

"He's had the nerve to do it after all," he muttered. Then he faced about.

"Got your revolver?" he asked me.

I nodded, and we crossed the hall and opened the door of the tower-room.

Through a thin blue haze of pistol smoke I saw Jonathan Mears smiling grimly at us from his big arm-chair at the back of the room; but what arrested my attention and made me cry out sharply was the figure of the man in the grey felt hat lying motionless at Jonathan Mears' feet, a revolver in his outstretched hand. He had on the same clothes he had worn the night I surprised him in the library, and there was no mistaking that ugly drooping mouth, or those pale red-lidded eyes.

"You recognise him, I see," observed the paralytic man coolly. "I thought it must be the same fellow that tackled you. He should have remembered the old adage about the pitcher that goes too often to the well."

"Is he dead?" I said.

"Quite dead, I'm afraid. At any rate he hasn't moved since."

"How did it happen?" Garth asked quietly.

"I got tired reading," he said, "and turned down the lamp and settled myself for a little nap until Randall got back—he went to Rockford this afternoon to see some friends. Just as I was dropping off I heard a loose board on the tower-stairs creak a little. 'Ah!' I said to myself, 'an unexpected visitor!' And I slipped farther down in my chair, gripped my revolver, and waited.

"I waited a long time without anything happening, and I had about made up my mind that the creaky board had scared my mysterious caller away, when his head appeared at the top of the stairs. He stood there for a minute or two watching me, trying to make out if I was asleep or not, I suppose; then he sneaked up the remaining steps as quietly as a cat, and started toward me. I twisted sharply about, and the instant I moved he pulled his gun on me. We fired almost together. Fortunately for me he was a poor shot," he added grimly.

I stepped forward and bent over the dead man. He had been shot through the left side of the body close to, if not touching, the heart. The bullet had come out considerably lower down near the small of the back. An odd look came over Garth's face when I told him that.

"Better see what he has in his pockets," he said.

I did so, and in his inner coat pocket I came upon the sealed envelope. It was empty; but in the same pocket I found a letter addressed to David Mears with two enclosures in it which I snatched eagerly out, and going nearer the light, read aloud. One of them was merely a short note, saying that the writer would call on David Mears the night of October 15th "to discuss the business mentioned in yours of recent date." It was signed simply "S. G." The other read as follows:

"I hereby acknowledge the receipt of \$5,000 paid me this day by David Mears for having testified to the death of his brother, Jonathan Mears.

"(Signed) SIMON GODDARD."

"What's that?" cried the paralytic man sharply, leaning forward in his chair—"testifying to my death?"

"That's what it says," I replied: "you can see for yourself." And I handed him the paper. He read it over slowly, and gave it back to me.

"I'd like to know what the devil it means," he said, scowling, "some dirty piece of rascality, that's certain."

"Whatever may be the meaning of it," I said, "I guess we don't need to look any further for your brother's murderer."

"You're right," put in Garth tersely. "We don't need to look any further for him—we've got him! And with a quick bound he leaped savagely upon the paralytic man, and pinned him against the back of his chair.

"Keep him covered!" he cried to me, "and get his gun away from him. Be quick about it!"

Altogether dazed as I was by Garth's action, I mechanically obeyed him. Jonathan Mears seemed too astounded to offer any resistance. When I had secured his revolver, Garth let go of him, and cautioning me to keep a sharp watch on him, he began to search his pockets. At this new indignity the paralytic man found his tongue.

"If this is a joke, gentlemen," he began angrily, "I must say I fail to see the point of it."

"It isn't a joke, Mr. Mears," said Garth calmly. "On the contrary—I guess this is what I've been hunting for," he broke off, handing me a crumpled sheet of paper. "Read it aloud, will you, if you can without taking your eye off him."

A singular change came over Jonathan Mears' face as I started to unfold the paper. All the malignity, all the ferocity of the man's inmost self seemed to rise to the surface and glare at us out of his hawk-like little eyes.

"Give that back to me," he cried hoarsely, "or by G—d! ——"

"Sit still!" roared Garth, pointing his revolver straight at him. Jonathan Mears sat still, but it was the stillness of a tiger ready to spring, and I watched him closely while I read the paper. It was dated Mears House, July 17th of the current year.

"This is to certify that I, Jonathan Mears, in return for \$1 and other valuable considerations this day received, do hereby give and make over to my brother, David Mears, my entire share of the property bequeathed me by my father, Ezra Mears; and do hereby relinquish any and all claim to and rights in said property in favour of said David Mears.

"(Signed) JONATHAN MEARS.

"(Witnessed) PAUL RANDALL."

"A very interesting document," Garth observed drily, "but a dangerous thing to carry around loose in one's pocket. If you'll keep your gun on him," he added, "I'll call Stimpson."

As he spoke we were startled by a sharp cry of "Help! help!" The voice was Margaret's. I turned and ran toward the door.

"Come back!" Garth called to me. "She isn't there, you fool!"

But I paid no heed to him. I rushed out of the room, calling her name, and in the pitch darkness of the hall I ran full tilt into a man. I dealt him a savage blow on the head with the butt of my re-

volver, and he fell groaning at my feet. At the same moment Margaret opened the door of her room, and stood there with a lighted candle in her hand, peering out at me. Her face wore a bewildered look as if she had just waked up.

"What is it?" she asked anxiously. "Why did you call me? Is anything the matter?"

I stared at her, too dumfounded to speak. She took a step or two toward me. Then she caught sight of the man I had struck down, and a startled cry broke from her.

"What have you done!" she exclaimed, and the horror in her voice roused my numbed wits. I glanced down at the prostrate figure at my feet.

"Why, it's Arthur!" I said stupidly. "I thought he'd gone."

She ran to him and raised his head in her arms. As she did so an agonised cry from Garth made me rush back to the tower-room.

Bursting in, I saw two figures whom I recognised as Randall and Stimpson struggling fiercely in the centre of the room. A second later they crashed heavily against the table, overturning the lamp, and plunging the room in a pungent blackness reeking of smoke and oil; but in that brief glimpse I had seen something else—something which gave me the key to the whole mystery of David Mears' death. It was the paralytic man's empty chair!

CHAPTER XXV

IN THE TOWER-ROOM

I STRUCK a match just in time to see Randall break loose from Stimpson and make a dash for the tower-stairs with the detective after him. A grim laugh made me glance quickly toward the opposite corner of the room, and there half-hidden in the gloom I saw the paralytic man kneeling on Garth's chest, his fingers about his throat.

He rose to his feet with a snarl as I sprang at him, and laid my cheek open with a terrific right-handed blow; but the next instant I had hurled myself on him and sent him crashing to the floor. Had I been in less of an insane fury, I might have clubbed him with my revolver and so ended the duel between us then and there; but I was bent on treating him as he had treated Garth, and strangling him with my bare hands if I could. But though rage doubled my strength for the moment, I soon found that I was no match for him in sheer brute strength. His great arms encircled me in a grip that seemed to crush my ribs, to break my back. I had got my hands on his throat, however, and I set my teeth and held on

while he twisted and turned, flinging me this way and that, and squeezing the breath slowly out of me.

How long I writhed in the clutch of those terrible arms I cannot say—not over a few minutes, I suppose, though it seemed hours. I was conscious only of darting streaks of fire along my spine, of a frightful pain in my side, a ringing in my ears, and of a horrible sense of suffocation as though my lungs were bursting. An occasional dreadful gurgle came from the paralytic man's throat, but his iron grasp never loosened; he never ceased his frantic efforts to shake off my grip. My strength, however, was rapidly leaving me. Very soon, I knew, it would fail me altogether; and then—I made a last desperate effort to concentrate what little I had left in my fingers, to sink them deeper in his huge flabby throat. But I could not do so. I felt them slowly relax; the drumming in my ears swelled to an enormous volume of sound; then ceased abruptly. . . .

“Give him some more brandy,” I heard someone say—the voice sounded a great way off and very faint. A thin stream of fire trickled down my throat. It set a thousand other fires alight within me, fires that seemed feeding on my very vitals.

“Why can't they leave me alone?” I thought in a passion of self-pity and of regret for the Land of Illusion wherein I had been walking again along the

Shore Road with Margaret in my arms. As before, the wind had blown a loose strand of her hair against my face, filling my nostrils with the sweet odour of it, and thrilling me like an unexpected caress—and they had waked me to a reality of excruciating pain, of fiendish torment!

And then the dream returned; only this time it was she who held me in her arms. I felt her breath on my cheek; the perfume of her hair was again in my nostrils, stronger, sweeter than before. I prayed that this time they would leave me in peace; but presently I heard the same voice—how I loathed the sound of it!—"He's coming round all right," it said. "A little more brandy——" I made an heroic effort and closed my mouth; but I could feel something being forced gently between my teeth, and once more a stream of liquid fire coursed through me, arousing the other dormant fires to fierce activity.

Only this time, curiously enough, there was no vanishing of the dream. Instead it grew more real, more vivid. Margaret was still bending over me, but the look in her eyes had changed—she seemed frightened, distressed; and there were other faces which did not belong there. I did not know who they were, and I wanted to tell them to go away and leave us alone together; but when I tried to, something seemed to snap in my head, and I sank into a black and soundless pit.

It was not until two days later that I learned the sequel of that terrible struggle in the tower-room. The intervening hours I passed for the most part in a heavy stupor, from which I was aroused at intervals by sharp pains in my side and back. Two of my ribs had cracked in the paralytic man's awful grip. I should be lucky, the doctor said, if I got up in less than a month.

My rescue was not at all the dramatic thing I had imagined. I had pictured to myself the timely appearance of Dent, or Stimpson, or possibly even Ryder; of a furious battle with Jonathan Mears before they could force him to release his hold; of another hand-to-hand conflict fiercer, perhaps, than any that had preceded it. My astonishment may be imagined, then, when Garth told me that nothing of the kind had happened, that my rescuer had been Margaret herself!

Without knowing it, toward the close of my fight with the paralytic man, I had cried repeatedly for help. Margaret had left Arthur and run to my assistance. When she came in I had just lost consciousness, unaware of the fact that I had succeeded at last in choking Jonathan Mears, too, into insensibility. That she had found courage to enter the tower-room at all was marvellous, I thought; for on the very threshold she must have come upon the body of the man in the grey felt hat. In one corner

Garth was lying—dead also, to all appearances; and near him the paralytic man and I lay motionless, his great arms still about me, my fingers still gripping his throat.

But only for an instant did she hesitate. Then she came straight to me, and putting down the candle, she succeeded—Heaven knows how!—in freeing me from Jonathan Mears' clutches and dragging me to the open window near his bed. And there she sat on the floor with my head propped against her shoulder, letting the cool night air blow over me.

It was thus Stimpson found her when he returned half an hour later from an unsuccessful chase after Randall. Garth was just coming-to as he appeared, and they laid me on the bed and plied me with brandy till I showed signs of life. Meanwhile Arthur had recovered enough from the blow I had struck him to rouse Mrs. Bartlett and have her look after Margaret, who was about ready to collapse. Garth said that Mrs. Bartlett seemed more shocked at finding Margaret with her hair down and only a dressing-gown on among a roomful of men than she did at anything else. "And he promised me only this afternoon that such a thing shouldn't happen again," she said, eyeing me resentfully, as though I had been to blame for it all!

Not till Dr. Satterlee arrived were they able to revive the paralytic man. The doctor thought he

must have burst a blood-vessel in his head; for he seemed on the verge of apoplexy. Later he had become delirious, and it was all that the four of them—Dr. Satterlee, Arthur, Garth, and Stimpson—could do to keep him quiet. He had babbled incessantly of David Mears and of a woman named Dorothy Peters, apparently a former sweetheart.

“By G—d! he shall pay for it! He shall pay for it!” he repeated over and over, cursing his dead brother with the most frightful vehemence. “Laugh, damn you!” he would cry. “‘He laughs best who laughs last,’ remember that.” And then he would chuckle in a revolting fashion. But only once in his ravings had he said anything which threw light on the murder itself, and this was no more than a scarcely intelligible muttering:—“Wait till he opens his eyes: wait till he opens his eyes. Then just another little tap on the head does it. Another little tap on the head, and no one any the wiser. They’ll all think Goddard killed him. . . . So you’ve waked up at last, have you? You see who it is? And you never suspected me, eh? None of ’em suspected me. They all think I’m a poor paralysed old man. They pity me. A-ha! . . .” And so he would ramble on for hours till he sank again into a stertorous sleep.

It was only a matter of days, the doctor said, before he would die; and this being so, Garth gave up any idea of putting him formally under arrest.

He was still hoping that he would have a lucid interval before the end—though Dr. Satterlee thought it very unlikely;—and that then he could be induced to tell us just how the murder had been done, and what part in it, if any, Paul Randall and the man in the grey felt hat had had. So far the police had not succeeded in catching Randall, but they expected to do so at any moment. Maggie Sullivan they had already arrested at Garth's request, and she was now lodged in the county jail.

Ryder's failure to return was explained by his being found the next day bound and gagged in a clump of bushes by the Shore Road not far from the spot where Margaret and I had met with the drunken lobsterman. Ryder had also been a victim of Simon Goddard's sinister knack of dissimulation. He had met him on his way back from the village searching frantically for someone to help him look after a friend who had shot himself accidentally in the woods nearby. So well did Goddard act his part, that it had never occurred to Ryder to doubt the truth of his story, and he had instantly agreed to accompany him. They had gone only a little way when Goddard turned suddenly upon him and knocked him senseless with the butt of his revolver. Then he had tied him so that on coming-to he could neither move nor cry out, and hidden him in the bushes. Garth thought that this brutal and seemingly wanton attack on Ryder

was due to Maggie Sullivan's having told Goddard of Ryder's call on us, and that Goddard had mistaken him for a detective, and made up his mind to get him out of the way so he could not interfere with his plans.

Arthur's unexpected appearance was the result of a sudden whim which caused him to cut short his journey and return at once to Mears House. He left the train at the first opportunity and took the next train back to Shelburne, reaching there at the same hour I had arrived the week before. While still some distance from the house he had heard the shots in the tower-room, and hurried to find out what had happened. As he came up the front stairs he, too, had heard Margaret scream, as he thought, but her voice seemed to him to come from the tower-room. When I dashed out so suddenly he had been too surprised to utter a word, and the light being at my back, he had failed to realise till too late that in the darkness of the hall I could not see who he was. Fortunately he had not been badly hurt by the blow I had given him.

Margaret, I learned, did not seem to be any the worse for her exciting experiences, though she still showed the effects of them, Garth told me, in a nervousness of speech and manner which he had not noticed in her before. This, though, he thought, might be largely due to her being deprived of the regular outdoor exercise to which she had been ac-

customed; and when I asked him in astonishment what was to hinder her from going out, he answered me in a single word—"Reporters."

It had been impossible, of course, to keep the death of the man in the grey felt hat a secret. The authorities had to be notified of it at once; and this led to the descent upon us a few hours later of a horde of newspaper men, asking for interviews, photographs, descriptions of the tragedy in the tower-room, etc., etc. In anticipation of this assault Garth had sent Stimpson and Ryder off before the news leaked out. He had prepared also a typewritten statement for the press representatives, which did not satisfy them in the least, since it merely stated what they already knew—that Jonathan Mears had shot and killed a burglar after a fierce struggle with him in which he had himself been very dangerously, if not fatally, injured. Further than this he had told them nothing, and had refused to admit that it had anything to do with the death of David Mears.

The reporters, however, insisted on finding some connection between the two events; and they accordingly proceeded to invent some very ingenious explanations linking them together, and emphasising the probability that David Mears had been killed either by the mysterious burglar or by some unknown confederate of his. Some fixed upon Randall as the murderer; others hinted broadly that Arthur might

be implicated in his uncle's death; but in none of these stories was the paralytic man mentioned as a possible author of the crime. It was, of course, extremely unlikely that even the most imaginative reporter should suspect that his paralysis had been merely feigned; for Garth took good care that no one besides Dr. Satterlee should get any inkling of the fact. I did not blame him for being unwilling to let the whole truth of the matter come out until he could, if possible, establish his conviction of Jonathan Mears' guilt by the man's own admission of it.

To what lengths some of the reporters went to try to get information from us may readily be guessed by anyone who has had experience with the more versatile and persistent members of the profession. We lived for days in a state of constant siege. If one of us ventured out even after nightfall for a breath of fresh air, he or she was sure to be pounced upon by some sharp-eyed sentinel, and almost tearfully besought to answer "just a few questions." Repeated attempts were made to bribe poor Dent to tell what he knew, and he carried on his duties for a time surrounded by a cordon of human interrogation-points. A few of the less scrupulous papers printed faked interviews with all of us, including even Mrs. Bartlett, whose indignation at seeing a picture of herself in a night-gown shielding Margaret from the attack of a villain in a black mask with a pistol in

either hand, I leave to the imagination of the reader.

I must admit that I felt a good deal of sympathy with these hungry news-gatherers; for it was some time before I myself found out just how Garth had fastened the murder upon the paralytic man, and meanwhile I was impatient to learn the meaning of several things connected with the affair which had completely puzzled me. To many of my readers, doubtless, whose wits are sharper than my own, much that mystified me requires no explanation—they have guessed its significance already; and of such I must ask pardon if I try their patience by touching upon matters which in their opinion need no elucidation. But it seems to me not altogether unreasonable to suppose that there may be others to whom some of Garth's actions may have appeared quite as inexplicable as they did to me, and who may, therefore, be interested in a long talk I had with him a few days later in which he satisfied my curiosity on these points.

CHAPTER XXVI

GARTH TABLES HIS CARDS

It was, if I remember rightly, the fourth day after the man in the grey felt hat had paid us his last visit that Garth came into my room with a bundle of typewritten sheets in his hand.

"What have you been doing?" I asked. "Writing a novel?"

"Nothing so simple," he replied. "I've been preparing a statement for the newspapers."

"Good Heavens!" I exclaimed; "you don't expect them to print a book about it, do you?"

He laughed.

"Not exactly, but I got so mad finally at those confounded reporters that I wrote directly to the newspapers, telling them that I had nothing to say about the affair now, but that later I might have a statement to give out. Here's a reply I got yesterday." He handed me a telegram. It was from the Managing Editor of the biggest New York daily, and read:

"Send us full account of Mears Mystery as soon

as possible. Will pay you five cents a word for exclusive use of story. Wire answer."

"That certainly sounds good to me," I said, "but I'll bet they kick at paying you at that rate for all you've written. You must have nearly ten thousand words there."

"In that case," he rejoined cheerfully, "I shall have to accept one of these other offers;" and he produced three more telegrams very like the first. "I guess I can strike a bargain with one of them that'll make up for all the bother I've had lately with that red-haired friend of yours, Cassidy, and the rest. It seems rather mean to play any favourites," he went on, "but unfortunately one has to live—or labours under the delusion that he must; and as I can't very well charge Keaton or Miss Ellis anything for my work——"

"Why shouldn't you?" I interrupted. "But for you, Jonathan Mears would probably have got away with all his brother had, and Margaret at any rate would have been left without a cent."

"Precisely," he agreed.

"But I don't see——" I began; and then I stopped, ashamed of my stupidity in not grasping his meaning sooner. The service he had done them in preventing the paralytic man's getting the property was a small thing, in Margaret's eyes at least, compared to an-

other result of his efforts—the blackening of David Mears' memory. She could not forgive him that. It was because she had from the first instinctively feared such a result that she had taken such a dislike to Garth. I understood now what he had meant when he told me after his first talk with her that he felt sure she would do all she could to prevent his finding the murderer. Doubtless Arthur shared in this feeling out of sympathy for her; and this, of course, put Garth in a very awkward position.

"It's my place anyway to settle the bill," I told him. "I got you to come."

"Who ever heard of a man paying to have his ribs broken!" he retorted. "Don't be an ass, Phil. I didn't come in here to talk about money matters, but to ask you if you'd mind going over the stuff for me and telling me what changes you think ought to be made in it. I don't intend to send it until the paralytic man dies or makes a confession, but I thought it just as well to have it ready."

I told him I'd be glad to, if he would answer some questions I'd been waiting to ask him.

"Go ahead," he said.

"First of all," I began, "how did you happen to suspect the paralytic man of being the murderer?"

"It took four pages to explain that," he replied, "but I'll try to state it a little more briefly to you.

In the first place there were two sets of possibilities to account for the murder—either it had been committed by outsiders, or by members of the household. In favour of the first supposition were:—David Mears' evident dread of some unknown enemy, the fact that the house had been broken into the night of his death, and the absence at the time of everyone except Mrs. Bartlett and the paralytic man—neither of whom could reasonably be suspected of having killed him.

“Two other things also emphasised the probability that some stranger had committed the crime—Ryder's arrival at Shelburne that afternoon and his having been seen to set out in this direction, and your meeting with the man in the buggy on the Shore Road at half-past eleven that night. It seemed almost certain that one of them, probably the man in the buggy, would turn out to be the murderer, though of course he couldn't have had anything to do with the removal of David Mears' body. Except for this extraordinary and apparently senseless procedure, and the frightening away of the servants by mysterious and unaccountable noises, it would have hardly occurred to me to suspect any inmate of the house of the crime. But both of these things tended to show that the murder had been carefully planned long in advance in such a way as to avoid all probability of its being laid at the door of anyone here.

“It was possible, of course, that I was mistaken in thinking this the motive for scaring away the servants and the evident intention to make David Mears’ death appear an accident. Such a plan might very well have been conceived and carried out by strangers; but if so, it would have been very difficult for them to have concealed all traces of their presence in the neighbourhood for so long. If, then, I were right in thinking that the murder was the result of a carefully elaborated and matured plan—and not the unpremeditated act of a burglar or someone else who could have had no opportunity to shape events and choose the most favourable time for such a deed—it must after all have been somebody living at Mears House who did it.

“It was not, however, until I had talked with Parsons and satisfied myself that he was not the murderer, that I came to suspect Jonathan Mears and Randall of the crime. What their reason for killing him could have been I did not know; but there were two possible ones—that Jonathan Mears might secure his brother’s property, or out of revenge for the inhuman way he had treated him. Either of these, it seemed to me, might have been the cause, though I considered it more likely that there was some stronger motive still back of their act. But though I grew more and more inclined to think that they were responsible for his death, I couldn’t formulate

any working hypothesis to fit the facts except upon the assumption that Jonathan Mears' paralysis was merely feigned, and that in reality he was as well able to walk as anybody.

"This supposition appeared so wild to me at first that I was inclined to reject it altogether, especially when I found that his story about having suffered a paralytic stroke some months before on his rubber plantation was apparently true; but the more I thought of it the more certain I became that he was shamming, and I did my best to verify this suspicion by going to his room frequently in the hope that he might betray himself by some slight movement which he would think quite noiseless. And finally I did hear just such a movement—a faint scraping noise that I felt sure he made by moving one of his feet a mere trifle. That convinced me that I was right about his ability to walk.

"Their plan for murdering David Mears, as I figured it out, had been for Randall to return from his make-believe fishing trip sometime that evening, and row close enough to shore to see Jonathan Mears signal to him after he had killed his brother. The paralytic man was then to go back at once to his room—to lessen the risk he ran of his absence from it being discovered—and Randall was to come ashore, get the body, and throw it over the cliff; after which he would row a couple of miles or so out to sea,

pitch his oars overboard, and drift about till he was picked up, thus establishing a safe enough alibi.

"What actually happened, I believed, was this: Jonathan Mears waited till some time after the man whom Parsons heard quarrelling with David Mears had gone——"

"Who was he," I interrupted, "the man in the grey felt hat?"

Garth nodded.

"Then he sneaked downstairs to kill him. In the meantime the butler had knocked David Mears senseless with the candlestick, and dragged him into the library. When the paralytic man opened the door and found his brother lying there unconscious, he thought naturally that Goddard had done it. He waited till David Mears had come-to enough to recognise him, and then struck him another blow with a heavy glass paper-weight which he took from the desk."

"How do you know that?" I asked.

"Keaton remarked that it was missing when we cleaned out the desk together later. After Jonathan Mears had killed him," Garth continued, "he went into the dining-room and signalled to Randall, intending to tell him that there would be no need for him to carry out his part of the programme, since it would certainly be thought that Goddard had committed the murder. It was then you arrived and

began pounding on the front door. The paralytic man didn't dare wait any longer to warn Randall, but hurried back to his room.

"Randall reached the dining-room window just as you started upstairs; and knowing nothing, of course, of your having seen the body, he carried it out and threw it over the cliff. Then he got into his boat and rowed out to sea. Unfortunately he was seen doing so by the man who took Keaton and me off the ledge, so his alibi won't be worth much, I'm afraid. I satisfied myself by comparing closely the probable amount of time which each of these actions would have taken with the facts I learned from you and Parsons that there was no discrepancy between them and the tragedy as I had reconstructed it."

"Why didn't you have them arrested long ago, then," I asked, "if you were so sure they had done it?"

"I told you once before," he returned, "that there's quite a difference between being sure of a thing in your own mind, and being able to prove it to the satisfaction of a judge and jury. I had to wait till I could get the proof."

"So that's why you let us all run the risk of being killed by that fiend, Goddard, or poisoned by that precious accomplice of his, Maggie Sullivan?"

"I had to take some rather dubious chances," he admitted.

"But I haven't got it through my head yet," I persisted, "just what part she and Goddard played in the whole business. That they were in with Randall and the paralytic man I see plainly enough, but it beats me to make out what they were all up to."

"It's very simple," he replied. "They were after that sealed envelope."

"What was in it?" I asked.

"David Mears' will, for one thing, that paper Jonathan Mears signed relinquishing the right to any share of his father's property, and——"

"The receipt Goddard gave David Mears for having testified falsely to the paralytic man's death," I put in.

"You're wrong there," he said. "That receipt and the note you found in Goddard's pocket were taken from David Mears' desk the night he was killed."

I stared at him uncomprehendingly.

"You'll have to get a club, I guess," I said at last, "and beat it into me. The events of the last ten days seem to have destroyed what faint glimmerings of intelligence I formerly possessed."

"Let's try what less violent measures can do first," he rejoined. "Try to fix your mind on the problem, and perhaps you'll be able to understand it if I use words of only one syllable."

"I doubt it," I replied cheerfully, "but I'll do my best."

"In the first place, then, try to grasp the fact that Goddard had no more idea than you did that either Jonathan Mears or Randall had anything to do with the murder, and that neither of them knew of Parsons having been in the house that night. Got that?"

I said I had, and Garth continued:

"As soon as Goddard heard of David Mears' death, he was afraid he'd be taken for the murderer, if that note and the receipt were found among David Mears' papers. When he failed to find them in the desk, he thought they must be in the sealed envelope which Maggie Sullivan had seen in Miss Ellis' trunk. Either he or Jonathan Mears knew all about Ryder, and hit upon the idea of Goddard's impersonating him and trying to secure the papers in that way. The paralytic man was equally anxious to get back the deed of gift his brother had made him sign before he would take him in, and to lay hands on the will he felt sure David Mears must have made, leaving all he had to Miss Ellis or Keaton. They all worked together, apparently, to get hold of these various documents, though in reality Jonathan Mears was making a cat's-paw of Goddard, whom he intended all along to 'double-cross' at the last moment."

I asked Garth how they happened to be working together.

"That I don't know," he said, "but I rather think the paralytic man had met Goddard before. They made use of Maggie Sullivan—whom either Goddard or Jonathan Mears had had installed in the house as maid—to keep them informed of everything that went on, and to help them all she could in carrying out their schemes."

"It was Randall, then, I suppose, that you heard that night at your door, and whom I saw drop out of the window in Margaret's room—after he had pretended to knock down Maggie Sullivan and throw her in the alcove?"

"Yes," he said, "and it was he also who released Goddard after I had locked him up in the lavatory. I heard him steal past my door while you and I were talking, and go downstairs; and I knew that if I were right in thinking he was the man you had fired at, he would try to find out what had become of Goddard and do his best to set him free. If he hadn't been obliging enough to, I'd have had to do it myself," he added; "for it would have defeated my plans for Goddard to have been put in jail just then."

"When Goddard finally succeeded in robbing Miss Ellis of the sealed envelope," Garth continued, "I knew I shouldn't have long to wait before finding out whether my theory about the murder was right

or not; and I suspected that if I were right, Jonathan Mears wouldn't hesitate to kill Goddard in order to make it appear that he had been guilty of the murder. Goddard must have been furious at finding that the envelope he had been working so hard to get didn't contain the papers he was after; and very likely he refused to hand over the will and the deed of gift to the paralytic man unless he agreed to pay him a good round sum for them. Jonathan Mears probably pretended he would do so, and promised to send Randall to Rockport the next day to get the money. As a matter of fact he had no intention of doing anything of the sort. Randall never left the house that day——"

"How do you know he didn't?" I broke in.

"Stimpson told me."

"And where was Stimpson all the time?"

"Right here, keeping tabs on them for me," he answered.

"He never went back to New York at all, then?"

"No, that's what I meant when I told you that telegram was only a blind. I'd arranged with him to send it in case anything happened to keep me away from the house for more than a few hours, so that he could be ready to arrest the paralytic man and Randall, if they tried to escape during my absence. The operator at the village gave him the message. When Keaton and I got back from Thornton's Ledge I had a talk

with Stimpson, and told him that I believed matters were coming to a head. Then when I learned from you later of the loss of the sealed envelope, I felt sure Goddard would come to see Jonathan Mears that night; and I sent Dent with a note to Stimpson, telling him to remain on guard outside the house and when I pulled up the shade to go to the bottom of the tower-stairs and wait there till I called him.

"As you know, things happened pretty much as I thought they would, though I didn't expect to be lucky enough to secure such absolute proof that the paralytic man had been shamming as I did the moment you told me how Goddard had been shot."

I asked him what he meant.

"Jonathan Mears must have been standing up, of course, when he fired at him," he explained. "The bullet came out lower down than it entered, you said."

I felt chagrined at my failure to make so very simple and obvious a deduction.

"Those papers he put in Goddard's pocket after he'd shot him," Garth went on, "and the one I found in his own pocket made the case against him complete. Only one of four persons, you see, could possibly have taken them from David Mears' desk. It was either Goddard himself—a perfectly untenable hypothesis, for he would have destroyed the note and the receipt immediately—or Parsons, or Randall, or Jonathan Mears. There would have been no object

in any of them doing so, unless with the intention of using them as a means of forcing Goddard to help secure the other papers; so it's quite clear that either the paralytic man or Randall took them."

"I'm beginning to get it through my head at last," I said, as he stopped to relight his pipe. "I see now why you wouldn't interfere with Maggie Sullivan, why you let the man in the grey felt hat get away, why you were so sure that neither Parsons nor Ryder was the murderer, and why you were so unwilling to let me know what you were up to; but there are still a few matters which aren't clear to me. I don't understand, for one thing, just how Jonathan Mears or Randall made those mysterious noises that scared the servants away and even made Arthur think there was something uncanny about them."

"It came near costing both of us our lives to show you how they were made," he answered soberly.

"Ventriloquism!" I exclaimed.

He nodded.

"Randall is quite an artist at it. He was hiding somewhere in the tower-room when we came in, and he made you think Miss Ellis was calling for help so as to get you out of the way and leave the field clear for them. Luckily Stimpson heard me yell, and tackled Randall, so I had only the paralytic man on my hands—or rather only his hands on me. If you hadn't——"

He was interrupted by a knock on the door, and Dr. Satterlee stuck his head in.

"The old devil's come to his senses at last," he said to Garth. "If you want to talk to him, now's your chance."

CHAPTER XXVII

AN INTERRUPTED STORY

GARTH rose immediately.

"One moment!" I cried. "I'm going with you."

"Are you crazy?" asked Dr. Satterlee.

"Possibly," I replied, "but I'm not going to miss hearing what Jonathan Mears tells you, if I break another rib to do it."

He snorted angrily.

"I never saw such an idiot!" he exclaimed. "How do you expect to get well, if you won't do as I tell you?"

"I seem to remember your saying some time ago," I retorted, "that I'd have a relapse and die if I got up before the end of the week. Well, I did get up, and I didn't have a relapse. On the contrary——"

"Oh, hang it all!" he broke in. "If you're so set on going, we'll have to carry you, I suppose."

"That might be a good idea," I returned amiably, "though I'm afraid you'll find me rather a heavy load."

"You'll weigh more dead than alive," he growled. "Lie still till I come back."

He went out and brought in a folding cot-bed upon

which he and Garth laid me, and so carried me into the tower-room, where they set me down facing the dying man.

He was lying amid a heap of pillows, against which his bald head and hairless face looked like some great yellow egg in a nest of cotton batting. At sight of me a spark of something very like amusement glimmered for an instant in his deep-set little eyes.

"Bound to be in at the death, eh?" he said. Then he scowled at Garth. "What the devil do *you* want?" he snarled. "Couldn't you even let me die in peace?"

"I want you to tell us how you killed your brother, and why," Garth answered.

"Sort of a death-bed confession, eh?" he sneered. "I wonder you didn't fetch a priest along to shrive me." He tried to laugh, but the effort was too much for him. "Brandy!" he gasped.

Dr. Satterlee gave him a swallow of it.

"After all, why shouldn't I?" he muttered. "Everyone will know then what a cur he was.

"There was a woman at the bottom of it, of course," he began. "There always is, they say. I've probably mentioned her often enough these last few days while I've been out of my head. Dorothy Peters her name was—a pretty little thing she used to be, daughter of a foreman in the old man's mill. All the young fellows in town were crazy about her,

but I was the worst. She didn't care a damn for me, either—just laughed at me when I asked her to marry me; so I cleared out, never went back, never even wrote home. That was thirty years ago—time enough to get a fool girl out of one's head, you'd think. The devil knows I tried hard enough to," he added.

"About six months ago I got a letter from Goddard—I'd run across him years before on the West Coast of Africa when I was half dead with fever—and he told me among other things what had become of her. Brother David, it seems, had an eye for calico, too, though no one would have guessed it—he was always a sour-faced, go-to-meeting sort—and had made her care for him, God knows how! He fooled her with a mock marriage, and then ran away and deserted her when he found she was going to have a child. After that she went from bad to worse, till finally she died—it doesn't matter where.

"Goddard wrote, too, that David had got someone to swear I was dead, and so secured my share of the property the old man left. He wanted to know what I was going to do about it. It didn't take me long to make up my mind to go back and kill him; but I didn't tell Goddard that: I knew I couldn't trust him. So I wrote him that David was quite welcome to what he'd got of mine; that I was a very sick man with only a little while left to live;

and that I didn't propose to spend that time trying to get even with anybody. The woman's death, I said, meant nothing to me: I'd forgotten her long ago.

"It took me a good while to work out a scheme for killing him without anyone's suspecting me—I had no mind to be hanged for ridding the earth of such a beast; but finally I decided to pretend to have a paralytic stroke there on my *hacienda*, and go back and make David give me a home with him. I thought he'd be willing to, if I promised not to kick up a row about the money he'd stolen. Then I could bide my time and kill him the first chance I had. There was only one thing that bothered me—I should have to have an attendant to pretend to look after me, and I couldn't very well keep him from finding out that my paralysis was just a bluff. I hoped, however, to find someone crooked enough to keep his mouth shut, if I paid him well for it; so as soon as I got to New York I advertised for a nurse, and about the first man to apply for the job was Randall. There was something about him—I don't know what—that reminded me of *her*. I found out that he was her son——"

"David Mears—Randall's father!" I cried.

He nodded.

"He was as eager to kill him as I was," he went on. "It was all I could do to keep him from flying at David's throat when he saw him, and persuade him

to wait till we could settle old scores without anyone being the wiser. I knew we should run less risk, if we weren't in a hurry. It was several weeks before we worked out a scheme that satisfied us, and nearly a month longer before we got a chance to carry it out—for until we had the house to ourselves, we didn't dare risk it. That was where Randall's trick with his voice came in handy, scaring the servants away and making them think the place was haunted."

What he told us about the murder tallied almost exactly with Garth's notion of how it had been committed. He had stolen downstairs in the dark after Parsons and Goddard had gone, and found David Mears lying there unconscious. After making sure that he was not actually dead, he had gone into the dining-room to get a candle, lighted it, and searched the desk for the deed of gift. There he had discovered the note Goddard had written David Mears and the receipt he had given him.

"At first," he said, "I thought I'd leave them where I found them; for I knew they'd be evidence enough to convict him of the murder; but then it occurred to me that I could make a better use of them than that. I knew, of course, that Goddard would be crazy to get hold of them as soon as he heard David was dead, and that my keeping the papers myself I could make him think David had hidden them away somewhere or given them to someone to

take care of; and that in this way I could get him to search the house and, I hoped, find the deed and David's will for me. So I slipped them into my pocket, picked up a big glass paper-weight on the desk, and went back to where he was lying. He was just coming-to, and I waited till he opened his eyes and recognised me before I killed him."—All the savage malignity of his nature, all his ferocious hatred of the dead man were reflected in his face as he added grimly: "I only wish I'd taken longer about it, but I was afraid he'd cry out and wake up Mrs. Bartlett.

"When I'd finished him, I went into the dining-room to signal to Randall and tell him there was no need of his doing anything. While I was standing there at the window, I heard someone pound on the front door. I didn't know whether it was locked or not, and it took all the gimp out of me: I couldn't stir for a moment. Then I blew out the candle, put it down on the table, and hurried back to my room, leaving Randall to get out of it as best he could. I thought, of course, he'd be discovered, and I only hoped it would be in time—before he'd started to carry the body out of the house."

He went on to tell us of his astonishment at finding that I had seen or heard nothing of Randall, and of his rage at knowing that he must have gone blindly ahead with their original plan, and so spoiled his scheme of fastening the guilt upon Goddard and mak-

ing it appear that he had killed him instead of its being an accident as they had intended it to seem.

As soon as Randall returned, he told him to find Goddard, who he felt sure must be still in the neighbourhood, and bring him to the tower-room. Randall had seen a light in the deserted shack on Thornton's Ledge, and guessed that Goddard must be living there. When Goddard came, Jonathan Mears told him that he was very anxious to get hold of the will which he believed his brother had made, and promised to pay him well if he would help them find it. Goddard agreed to try, and admitted that he himself wanted to secure some of David Mears' papers, and that he had got Maggie Sullivan to take a position as maid to help him steal them.

From that time all four of them—Goddard, Maggie Sullivan, Randall, and Jonathan Mears—had worked together to get the sealed envelope which David Mears had entrusted to Margaret. The paralytic man had devised the scheme of Goddard's impersonating Ryder on learning from him why it was that David Mears had feared the man so much that he had asked Goddard to be on the watch for him and to kill him if he appeared. It was Randall who entered Margaret's room while she was talking with Goddard in the library, and Randall also who bound and gagged Jonathan Mears—with his consent, of course—in order to make it appear that burglars had

visited the house the afternoon I disobeyed Garth's instructions and went partridge shooting. It was then Maggie Sullivan had broken into the trunk in which Arthur had locked the contents of David Mears' desk, and not finding the papers there, she had searched Margaret's room again and taken the mounted photograph of her father on the chance that they might be hidden in the frame.

Garth was right, too, in his guess as to what Goddard had done after robbing Margaret of the sealed envelope. He had gone straight to Jonathan Mears and demanded the money he had promised him. The paralytic man had said he would send Randall to Rockford to get it, and had arranged with Goddard for him to come to the tower-room the next night. It was after his talk with the paralytic man that Goddard had seen Maggie Sullivan and given her the key to the chest—thinking it likely Garth would bring it back from the ledge with him—and had told her to get a change of disguise from it, and bring to him at their regular trysting-place in the clump of scrub-oaks. Randall had seen her go there twice the next day, once before breakfast and again immediately after luncheon. It was then, doubtless, that she had told Goddard of Ryder's call on us.

Of what took place between himself and Goddard in the tower-room, Jonathan Mears refused at first to speak.

"You're quite welcome to think I murdered him, too, if you want to," he said sullenly; but after a moment he changed his mind. "After all I may as well tell you," he muttered. "It's the same to me whether you believe it or not."

"It was a little after eleven when he came. Randall was hiding in there"—he nodded toward a big old-fashioned wardrobe against the wall opposite to him. "Goddard wanted to know right off if I'd got the money. I told him I had. 'Then hand it over,' he said. 'I'm in a hurry.' 'Not in too much of a hurry to have a look at these, I guess,' I said, taking the note and the receipt out of my pocket. He recognised them at once, and an ugly look came over his face. 'Where did you get those?' he asked. 'What dirty game have you been playing with me?' 'Never mind about that,' I said. 'I've got 'em and I intend to keep 'em unless you hand over those papers in exchange.' 'You do, eh?' he growled—and there was murder in his eye. 'We'll see about that!' He reached for his gun. I sprang up and fired the same instant he did."

"Why didn't you shoot him from your chair?" Garth asked.

"Habit, I guess," he replied. "I could have as well as not—I had him covered all the time; but I always shoot better on my feet. I knew, too, it would rattle him and queer his aim. He thought I

was really paralysed, you know. It must have been a big surprise to him to find I wasn't." He smiled grimly.

"It didn't take me ten seconds," he went on, after pausing a moment to get his breath—talking so long had nearly exhausted his strength—"to put that note and receipt into his pocket and to grab up the deed, but the other paper—the will—I couldn't find: it must have been under him, I suppose. I was still hunting for it when I heard you coming——"

"And hasn't it been found?" I interrupted.

"Not to my knowledge," said Garth, "but I think I know who did find it."

An exclamation from Dr. Satterlee prevented me from questioning Garth further, and made me glance quickly at Jonathan Mears. He was sitting straight up with both arms stretched out in front of him, and there was a terrible rigidity about him like that of a corpse; but deep in that hairless skull his hawk-like eyes burned feverishly.

"You never cared for me, Dorothy," he cried suddenly in a loud voice. "If you had—if you had——" Something within him seemed to snap; the light in his eyes went out; he fell limply back against the pillows, and the brandy which the doctor had put hurriedly to his lips trickled slowly out of one corner of his half-opened mouth.

CHAPTER XXVIII

I SEEK THE ANSWER TO A RIDDLE

THE injuries I had received in my struggle with the paralytic man kept me confined to my room for nearly three weeks after his death; and as I had never before been laid up for more than a few days at a time, I found the tedium of it wellnigh unbearable. Had it not occurred to me to occupy myself by writing an account of all that had happened at Mears House since the night of my arrival, time would have hung even heavier on my hands. But in attempting to practise the art of composition—in which, as the reader need not be told, I was utterly unversed—I gained a considerable amount of that enjoyment and distraction one is apt to find in tackling any new task which looks fascinatingly easy, however difficult it may really be.

I had indeed little else to do except read and think; for Garth had left the day after our last talk with Jonathan Mears, and Arthur for some reason or other did not come to see me with anything like the frequency I had expected. When he did he seemed distraught and ill at ease. The change in him which had startled me so when he had come upon me in

the library the morning after my arrival, grew more noticeable every day. He wore constantly the look of a man who has something preying upon his mind. His face had become drawn and haggard, his whole manner more nervous and irritable.

I was inclined at first to ascribe this chiefly to his infatuation for Margaret and her refusal of him; but this explanation did not wholly satisfy me, and it was not long before I decided that it must be due to something else. In reaching this conclusion I was influenced a great deal by what Garth had said about the disappearance of David Mears' will. He had refused to tell me whom he suspected of having taken it from the tower-room; but upon my saying half-jestingly that I felt sure he would tell me, if he really knew, he had agreed to put it in writing and leave the letter with me on the understanding that I was not to read it until I had already learned the truth.

I guessed, of course, that either Margaret or Arthur must have taken it—it could hardly have been anyone else; but it puzzled me to decide which. If David Mears had left all his property to Margaret, it seemed absurd to suppose that either of them should have kept quiet about finding the will; for I knew Arthur too well to suspect him of doing anything so dishonourable, and I could not believe that Margaret would have any scruples about accepting such a bequest, since she must have known all along that

David Mears intended to leave her everything, and had probably come to regard it as quite right and natural—which indeed it was—that he should do so.

If, on the other hand, Arthur had been the sole beneficiary, he might, I thought, have destroyed the will with the intention of persuading her to accept the whole or at least a large part of her guardian's fortune. That David Mears should have disinherited Margaret and left all his money to Arthur—with whom he was never on very friendly terms—seemed hardly probable, and yet on the whole more likely than that Margaret should have torn up a will either in her own favour or his—the only other way I could account for its disappearance.

One afternoon when I had grown tired of hunting in vain for a satisfactory answer to the question, Arthur came in just as I had picked up the envelope Garth had left with me, half-minded to open it.

"So Dent's back already with the mail," he remarked. "It must have got in unusually early."

I explained what the letter was I had in my hand. When I had finished, he said shortly:

"You needn't bother your head about it any more. I found it."

"I thought you must have," I replied, rather surprised at his manner—it was half sullen, half defiant; "but it seemed such a queer thing for your uncle to have done——"

"Done what?" he demanded irritably.

"Left you everything, of course."

"He didn't: he left it all to Margaret."

"And you kept quiet about it because you didn't want her to have it, I suppose?"

"Yes."

I grunted impatiently: I was not in a jesting mood.

"You didn't expect to find me a thief, of course," he went on. "I never thought myself I should fall quite so low as that. It only shows——"

"See here, Arthur," I interrupted, frowning, "if you won't discuss the matter seriously, let's talk of something else. My sense of humour may be deficient to-day, but I'm hanged if I can see anything very funny in your remarks."

"You think I'm joking!" he cried. "I wish to G—d I were!"

"You don't mean to tell me—it's too ridiculous!" I broke off. "You might as well ask me to believe you had a hand in killing your uncle."

"It would be pretty close to the truth if I did tell you so."

"What do you mean by that?" I said sharply.

"That I knew all along it was bound to happen—that I might have prevented it if I'd wanted to."

"You knew all along that Jonathan Mears intended to kill him?" I repeated incredulously.

He nodded.

"But how could you? You didn't know he was shamming?"

"No, but I felt sure just the same that he'd murder him sooner or later."

I drew a long breath.

"That's all rot," I said cheerfully. "You think so now because you're in just the state to imagine a lot of nonsense. In reality——"

"I've told myself that a million times," he interrupted; "but it doesn't alter the fact that I knew it was bound to happen, and that I could have stopped it if I hadn't wanted him out of the way. I hoped he'd kill him," he went on excitedly. "I was glad when you told me of his death."

"But why——?"

"Good G—d! how dull you are!" he burst out. "Can't you understand why? Haven't you got it through your head yet why I didn't want Margaret to have his money?"

"No," I said, "I haven't."

"Well, I'll tell you. It was so she would marry me."

I stared at him in amazement.

"You must be crazy," I said at last.

He laughed shortly.

"Perhaps I am; but I knew that so long as he lived she wouldn't leave him, and I thought after his death she might be willing to marry me, especially

if she were left penniless. She'd have had to live here then at any rate, and I hoped that in time she might come to care for me enough—I was a damned fool!" he broke off bitterly, "a damned pig-headed fool!"

"I'm afraid you were, Arthur," I said quietly. "Margaret, I guess, isn't that sort of a girl."

"I can't help thinking just the same that everything might have come out as I wanted it to, if——" He paused.

"If what?" I asked.

"Never mind," he said curtly. He was trying hard, I could see, to get control of himself.

"Now that I've told you all about it," he went on in a tone of bitter self-contempt, "what do you think of me?"

"I think you lost your head and made an ass of yourself, that's all," I replied; "but you're making a bigger mistake to feel so cut up about it. There isn't a particle of sense in blaming yourself for your uncle's death—you'll realise that when you're able to take a rational view of things, and it isn't too late to fix the other matter up. You haven't destroyed the will?"

He shook his head.

"Then it'll be easy enough to pretend that it's been kicking around under the wardrobe or somewhere else in the tower-room all this time, and that you've just found it. No one but ourselves need be any the

wiser. And as for Margaret—remember what I told you the other day, and be patient.”

He gave me an odd look.

“That advice comes well from you,” he retorted, “when you’re in love with her yourself.”

“You’re the second person that’s told me that,” I said. “I don’t see how people get such queer notions.”

“Bosh!” he exclaimed. “Any fool would have had sense enough to notice it. I’ve known it ever since the night she had that adventure with you on the Shore Road. Just to see you look at her is enough——”

“I won’t pretend to deny,” I broke in rather hurriedly, “that I find her charming. If she were nearer my own age, or I nearer hers, I might even fancy myself in love with her; but considering the difference in years between us——”

“Which doesn’t amount to that,” he said, snapping his fingers.

“——which on the contrary amounts to a great deal,” I continued gravely; “it would be the height of absurdity for me even to think of such a thing.”

“I’ll bet you’ve thought of very little else for the past three weeks,” he declared.

“I’ve done nothing of the sort,” I protested hastily. “I’ve had other things to think of. Besides, I’ve been writing a book, as you know.”

"Oh, well, we won't fight about it," he said. "God knows it doesn't surprise me any: I only wonder you didn't fall in love with her sooner, particularly since——" He checked himself abruptly.

"I came in to bid you good-bye," he continued. "I'm really going this time, too, and not coming back—at least not for a long while. I've about decided to spend two or three years abroad."

"I'm mighty sorry to hear that," I told him. "I hoped we might have a little shooting after all—I shall be able to get out in a few days now. The marshes will be pretty bare, of course, but we ought to find plenty of partridges still."

"It'll be a long while, I'm afraid, before we go gunning together again," he said. "What sport we've had here! It's a pity to think it's all over and done with."

"Over and done with—nothing!" I declared. "You talk as if you were going to be away a lifetime. When you come back we'll have just as good fun as we used to."

"You'll probably be married long before that," he said, "and then——"

"Rot!" I exclaimed. "There isn't one chance in a thousand of my marrying, and you know it."

He looked at me rather sceptically for an instant: then he smiled.

"Good-bye," he said, "and good luck to you."

Write once in a while when you feel like it—I'll let you know my address later. You'll attend to settling up the estate for her?" he added.

I told him that I would gladly.

He took something out of his pocket and gave it to me. I laid it down without even glancing at it—I knew it was the will—and gripped his hand, but the words I wanted to say were stuck somewhere in my throat.

At the door he turned with something like the old amused look in his eyes.

"Do you know, Phil," he said, "you're one of the biggest fools God ever made?"

"Any particular reason for reminding me of the fact?" I enquired, smiling.

"Yes," he said, "but it wouldn't be fair for me to tell you what it is. Possibly Margaret may be willing to. I should ask her at any rate if I were you." And he went out without giving me time to reply.

"Now what could he have meant by that?" I asked myself. "What on earth has Margaret to do with it?" But as I had told her that night on the Shore Road when we were discussing Garth's telegram to Stimpson, I was never any good at guessing riddles, and I soon gave up trying to make any sense out of this one. Instead, after a hasty look at the will, I opened Garth's letter—to find that he had

been quite right, not only regarding the disappearance of the will, but also as to Arthur's reasons for having taken it. I was not in the least astonished. It seemed incredible that I shouldn't have guessed it myself. I did not wonder that Garth had been so often exasperated by my dulness, or that Arthur should have exclaimed at it. Throughout the whole affair I had shown about as much insight and penetration as a cigar-store Indian.

For a long while I sat there, reflecting upon my amazing inability to discover the meaning of the simplest and most obvious facts in the case—things which it seemed to me now the veriest idiot should have found no difficulty in interpreting.

"If I weren't such a confounded fool," I thought, "I should know, too, what Arthur meant by saying that Margaret might be able to tell me. I've a good mind to follow his advice and ask her. I'll do it," I said to myself after a moment's consideration, "right now."

And unmindful of Dr. Satterlee's orders that I was on no account to leave my room for another week at least, I went in search of her.

CHAPTER XXIX

WHY MARGARET WOULDN'T BID ME GOOD-NIGHT

I FOUND Margaret before the open fire in the music-room. She looked unusually grave. No doubt she felt very badly about Arthur's going, and perhaps blamed herself unduly for it. I knew it must have been hard for her to bid him good-bye. What a fool he had been, I thought, not to follow my counsel and trust to time to increase her regard for him. In his place, I told myself rather bitterly, I would cheerfully have waited years.

She seemed surprised at seeing me.

"I didn't know you were well enough to leave your room," she said. "Dr. Satterlee told me it would be another week at least before you could."

"I've only one fault to find with Dr. Satterlee," I said—"he's too firm a believer in the rest cure. I should have become bed-ridden, if I'd done as he wanted me to; but as I wouldn't, I think I shall be all right again in a few days now. And I have you to thank for it," I went on earnestly. "If it hadn't been for you——"

"I'm afraid I wasn't of very much use," she broke in, "I got there too late to do anything."

"It was extremely good of you to come at all," I declared warmly, "especially after the way I let you be half killed by that scoundrel, Goddard."

"Please don't say any more about it," she begged. "The whole thing is too dreadful to speak of. I dream of it still."

I wanted to tell her that I did, too, and that my dreams were anything but terrible ones; but before I could do so she said:

"Arthur tells me you've been writing a book."

"Trying to," I amended.

"That must be lots of fun."

"I thought it would be when I began," I said ruefully, "but—have you ever tried to write one?"

She shook her head.

"Don't," I said. "It's something like learning to play golf, only more so."

"You must let me read it," she went on. "I'm sure I should find it very interesting, though I haven't any idea what it's about."

"I'm afraid my pride is too sensitive to risk it," I replied. "It would be sure to make you laugh where you shouldn't, and *vice-versa*. By the way," I added, anxious to change the subject for fear she should insist on my telling her at least what I had been writing of, "I suppose Arthur has told you about his finding the will?"

She nodded.

"I wanted to speak to you about that," she said. "It isn't right that I should have everything and he nothing. Can't it be arranged so that half the estate will go to him?"

"Not unless he's willing to take it as a gift from you, I'm afraid."

"He won't agree to that. I tried to make him, but he said it was all nonsense, that he had plenty of money, and that——" She stopped in some confusion.

"Then unless you want to try your hand at forging a new will, nothing can be done about it."

"I always thought lawyers could do anything," she remarked disappointedly.

"We haven't quite got to that point yet," I returned, "though of course we hope to some day; but at present there are lots of things we can't do—make a woman tell how old she is, for example, or why she wouldn't bid you good-night."

She was looking at the fire as I spoke, and her face seemed to catch a sudden rosy heat from the flames.

"When Arthur said good-bye to me just now," I continued after a moment—during which I made the surprising discovery that none of the girls I knew had such a fascinating little tilt of her nose, or such wonderfully thick dark eye-lashes—"he was polite enough to tell me that I was one of the biggest fools God ever made. I can't say truthfully that it was altogether

news to me, for I've had a suspicion of it for some time; but I was interested to know why he'd thought fit to mention the fact just then. He admitted he had a reason for doing so, but he said it wouldn't be fair for him to tell me what it was, and added that you might be able to."

"I?" she exclaimed with a startled look at me. "What *could* he have meant?"

"That's precisely what I've been asking myself," I replied. "I hoped you might know. It's very disappointing to find that you don't; but possibly Mrs. Bartlett or Dent can inform me."

"I should certainly ask them if I were you," she said gravely.

"I intend to," I returned, "and if I'm not much mistaken, Mrs. Bartlett at least will have something pertinent to say on the subject."

Margaret laughed outright.

"I'm afraid she doesn't altogether approve of me," I said sadly. "She thinks it was all my fault that you went with me that night, and that I'm entirely to blame for what happened to us. I suppose if she knew that I really did want you to go, she'd be even more furious with me."

She turned and faced me accusingly.

"But you *didn't* want me to go with you; you know you didn't. You tried your best to get me to go back."

"That was only my outrageous sense of duty asserting itself," I declared. "I was hoping all the time you'd come."

"I don't believe it."

"It's true all the same," I said, "but I don't wonder you find it hard to believe. I found it so myself. In fact it's taken me nearly a month to be convinced of it. I'm extraordinarily slow at times in getting a thing through my head," I added humbly. "Perhaps you've noticed it?"

"You mean your not guessing what that telegram meant?"

"No," I replied earnestly, "I mean my not realising sooner that I was in love with you. Of all the stupidities I've been guilty of since I arrived here," I went on rapidly—"and Heaven knows I've behaved like a perfect fool from first to last!—that is certainly the most astounding. Until a week ago I actually didn't know I loved you! I thought my feeling for you was something very different—a sort of brotherly, almost fatherly affection. But since that night in the tower-room I began to understand what it really was."

"I hadn't meant to tell you this," I went on a trifle unsteadily, "but somehow I couldn't help it."

"Why should you?" she said—and her voice was so low I could scarcely hear it.

"Why?" I repeated, stifling a sudden preposterous hope, "because I know, of course, it can only

pain you to learn of it, because I'm not such a presumptuous fool as to think that—that you care at all for me."

For what seemed a long, long while she sat quite still, her face turned away from me. Then she drew a long breath and looked bravely into my eyes, a shy smile on her lips.

"That would be the stupidest mistake of all," she said softly.

I shall say nothing of what were to Margaret and me the chief events of the succeeding fortnight; for I realise that they would make but dull reading—the doings and sayings of engaged people, I am well aware, are of interest only to themselves.

After many discussions we decided not to sell Mears House, as Margaret had wished to do at first—thinking she could not bear ever to live in it again; but to spend our summers there. We were a good deal influenced in making this decision by Mrs. Bartlett, who was too old, she said, to "stand transplanting"; and so it was arranged that she should go on living there as caretaker the year round, and that Dent should remain also and see what he could do to reclaim the waste pasture land and make a real farm of the place. I must say that I hadn't much faith in the result of his efforts, though I didn't like to chill his enthusiasm by saying so, and I was glad

later that I hadn't; for he succeeded far beyond my expectations.

It took a great deal of urging on my part to get Margaret to consent to an early marriage, though I spoke as feelingly as I could of my advancing years. She declared it was absurd of me to talk as though I had one foot in the grave when I was not yet forty.

"I'm precious near it, though," I said gravely, "and you've probably heard of Dr. Osler's famous prescription? Besides, you don't want everyone to think you're my daughter, do you? I don't, at any rate."

She yielded finally, much to my delight; for I could not bear the thought of her staying on without me all winter at Mears House, where she would be constantly reminded of the dreadful events which preceded and followed David Mears' death. Despite our happiness, there were moments when the recollection of them would cut short her laughter and bring a look of sadness to her face. I did my best to help her forget them by speaking of them as little as I could; but it was impossible to avoid doing so altogether—there were too many provocations.

The excitement in the neighbourhood over the affair was slow to die down. On our walks we frequently met people who did not hesitate to ask us all sorts of distressing questions about it; and the arrest and confession of Randall—which occurred during

the last week of my stay—revived general interest in the case. We had even to repel another onslaught of reporters, who, I am thankful to say, did not discover the secret of our engagement. I tremble to think what the consequences would have been if they had!

But though I was careful not to pain Margaret by any allusions to the tragedies connected with her guardian's death, there was one question which I wanted very much to ask her; and late one afternoon on our way back from the village I yielded to the temptation to do so. We had just reached the place where I had caught her in my arms the night she fainted—dark as it had been then, I had no difficulty in locating the spot exactly. I stopped and drew a little circle in the dust with the tip of my shoe.

"This, ladies and gentlemen," I said, apostrophising an imaginary audience, "is the historic spot where the fool errant stood just before the miracle happened which made of him a fool—hang it!" I broke off, "I can't remember the French word for 'blessed.' Never mind. It is here the great transformation scene took place——"

"What *are* you talking about?" Margaret broke in.

"Woman," I said severely, "cease your ridiculous attempts to mystify and deceive me. You know perfectly well what I'm talking about."

Still she pretended not to understand.

"We shall be late for dinner," she remarked, "if you don't stop making an idiot of yourself and come along."

"Dinner!" quoth I, and again, "Dinner!"

"Yes, dinner," she repeated unashamedly, "and roast squab, too."

"Her thoughts at this sacred moment," I went on, "are of squab!—of squab, please observe, ladies and gentlemen, in itself an inoffensive enough bird, or shall we say fowl, but—— Stop!" I cried, running after her, "there is one thing I must know before I leave this place."

"What is it?" she asked.

"I was just going to mention it," I returned, "when you so rudely interrupted me."

"I didn't interrupt you," she retorted. "You interrupted yourself."

"It amounts to the same thing," I said; whereat she blushed, and asked me again rather hurriedly what I wanted to know.

I took the precaution of preventing her escape before I answered. Then I said, speaking very slowly and distinctly:

"Why was it you wouldn't bid me good-night?"

"I shan't tell you," she said.

"Very well," I rejoined, lifting her in my arms, "no tellee, no squabee."

"Put me down this instant, Phil," she commanded.

"Why wouldn't you bid me good-night?" I repeated.

She remained obstinately silent.

"You know the penalty," I reminded her, "for refusing to answer the questions of the examining lawyer."

As she made no reply, I imposed it.

"Be careful," she begged. "Someone might see you."

"I don't care if they do," I said, and I kissed her again.

"Put me down," she said at last rather breathlessly, "and I'll tell you."

I put her down and waited.

"I think it's perfectly horrid of you to insist on knowing," she declared. "You won't love me half so much."

"You should have thought of that before you promised," I said sternly. "It's too late now. You must tell me the whole shameful truth, if it kills my love for you entirely."

"It was all your fault anyway," she began.

"I knew you'd say that," I replied, chuckling.

"Well, it was! You—you told Dent you only did it to—to amuse yourself."

"You heard what I said to him!" I exclaimed.

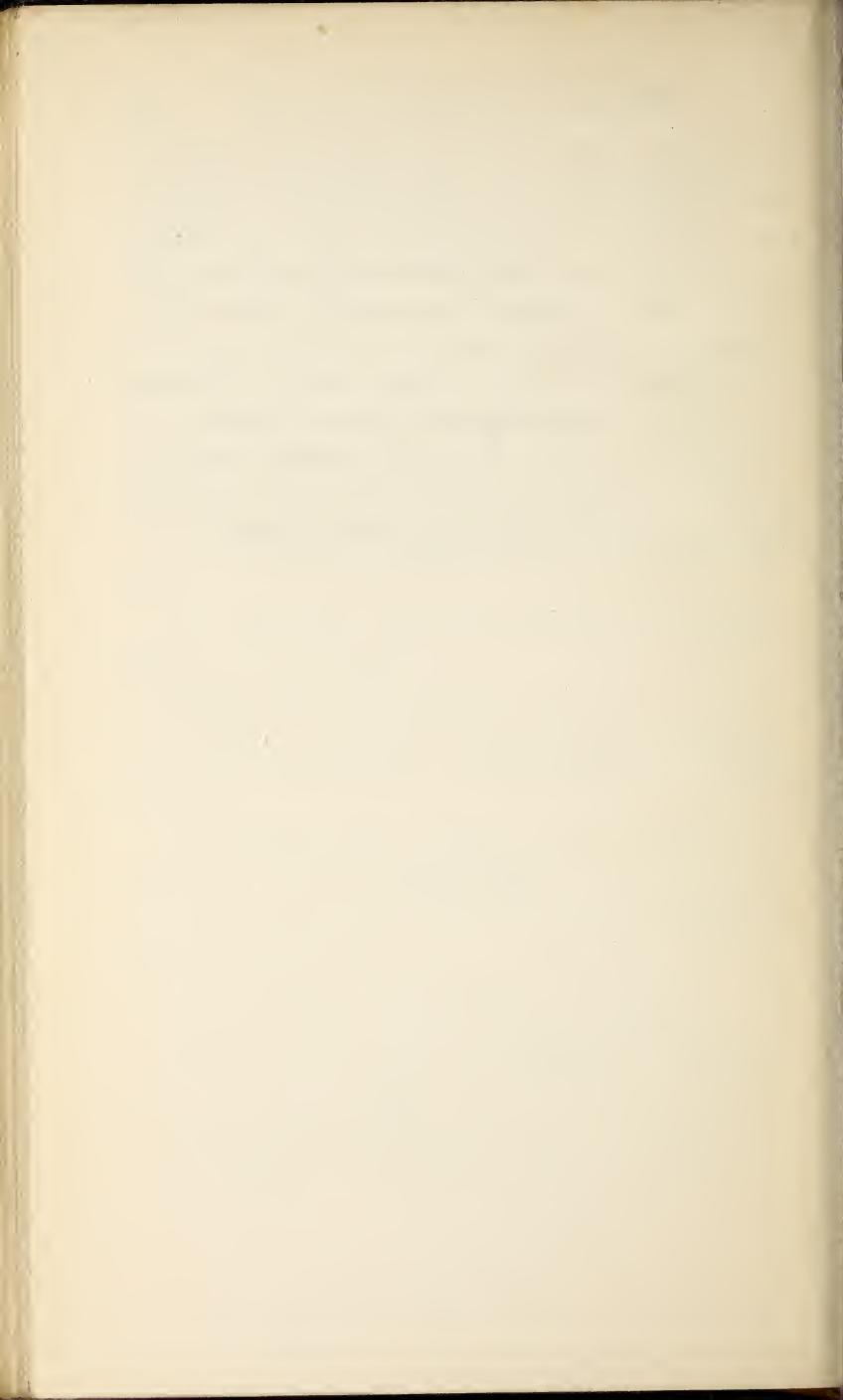
She nodded.

"I wasn't really unconscious any of the time," she explained hurriedly. "I only pretended to be because—because I *liked* to have you carry me. There! I've told you," she added with a piteous little catch in her voice, "and now you—you'll always think me——"

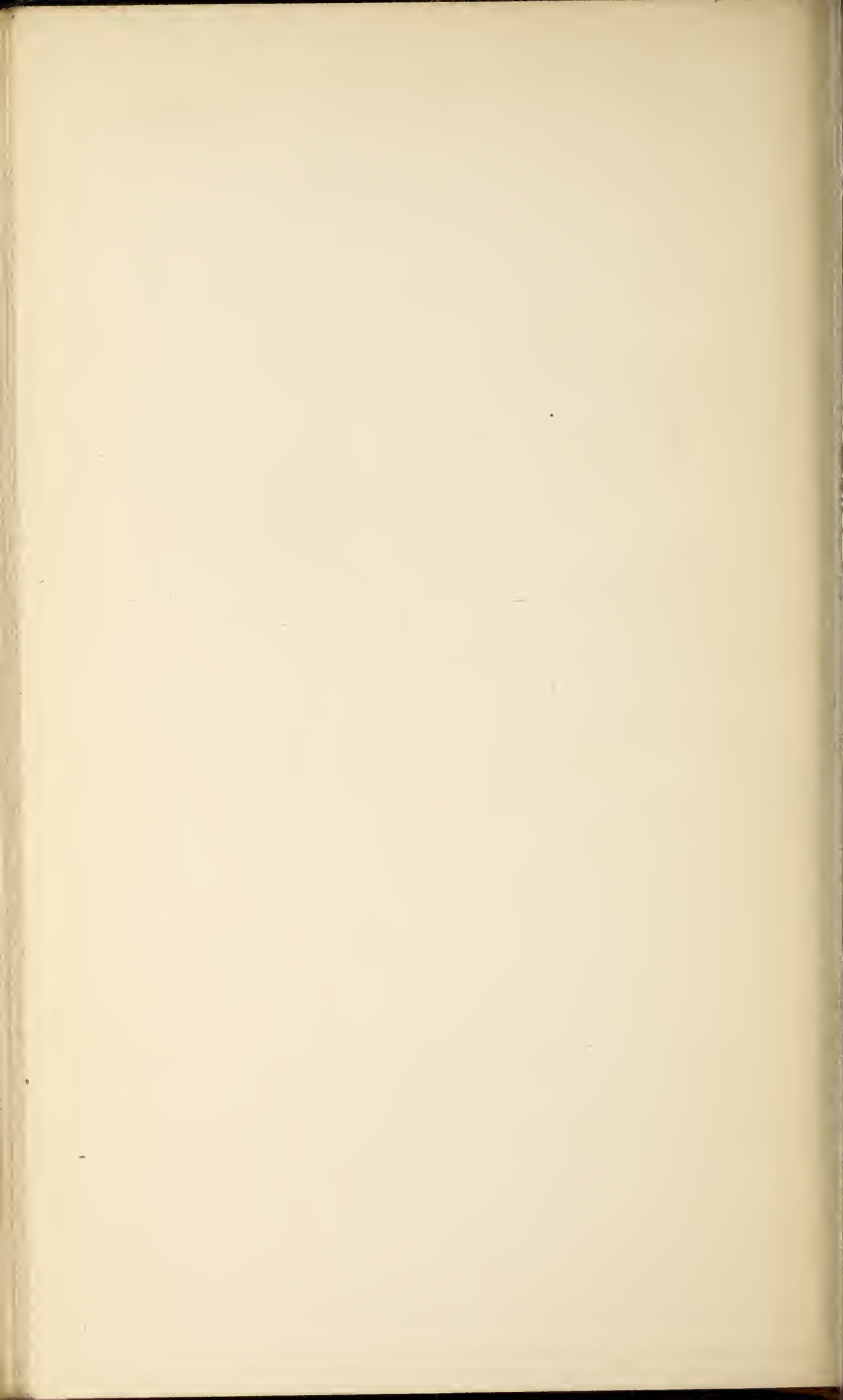
I stopped her saying anything more by snatching her up again, and closing her mouth with kisses.

And so I carried her back along the Shore Road as on that other night—only this time I did not put her down till we had reached Mears House itself.

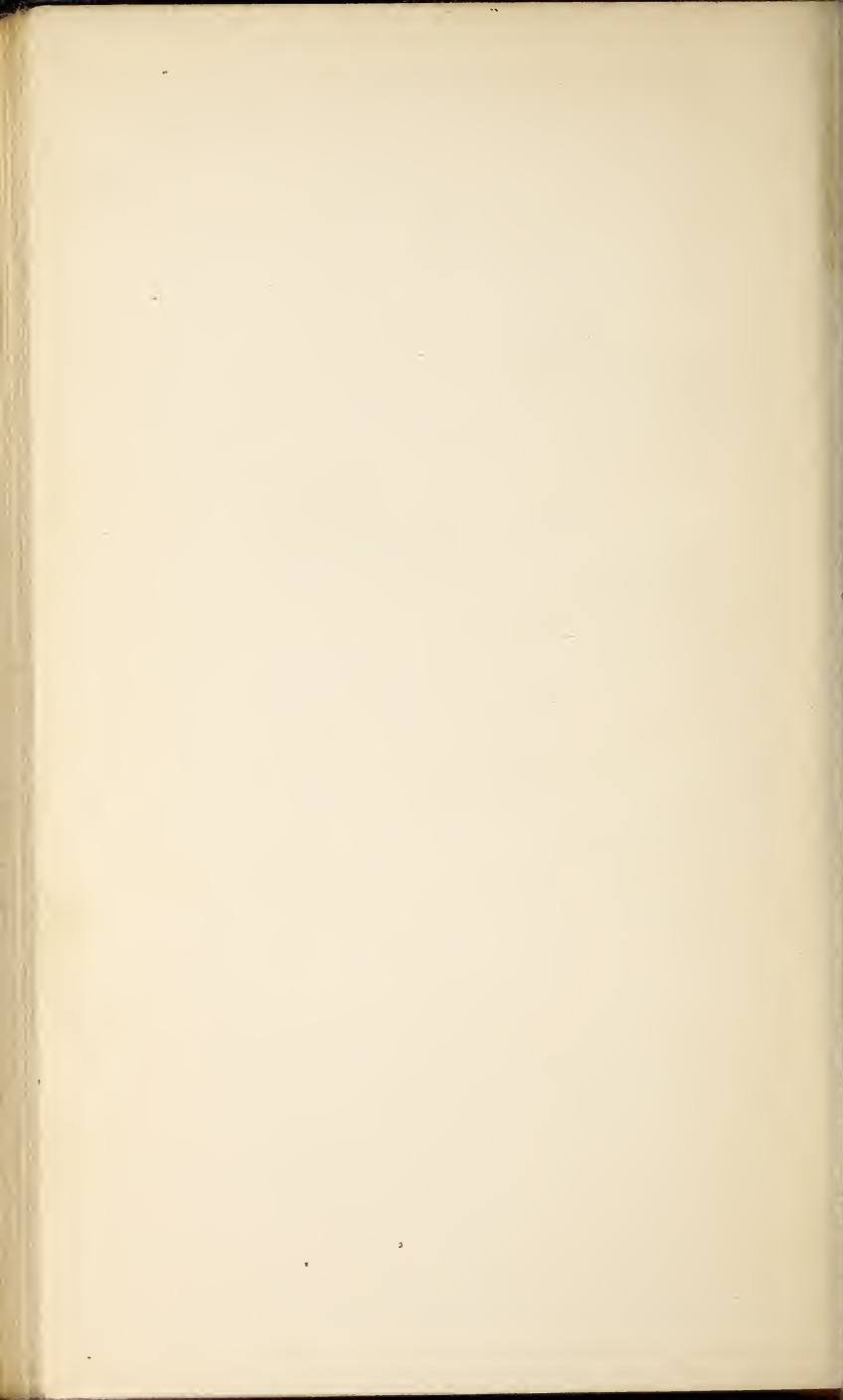
THE END

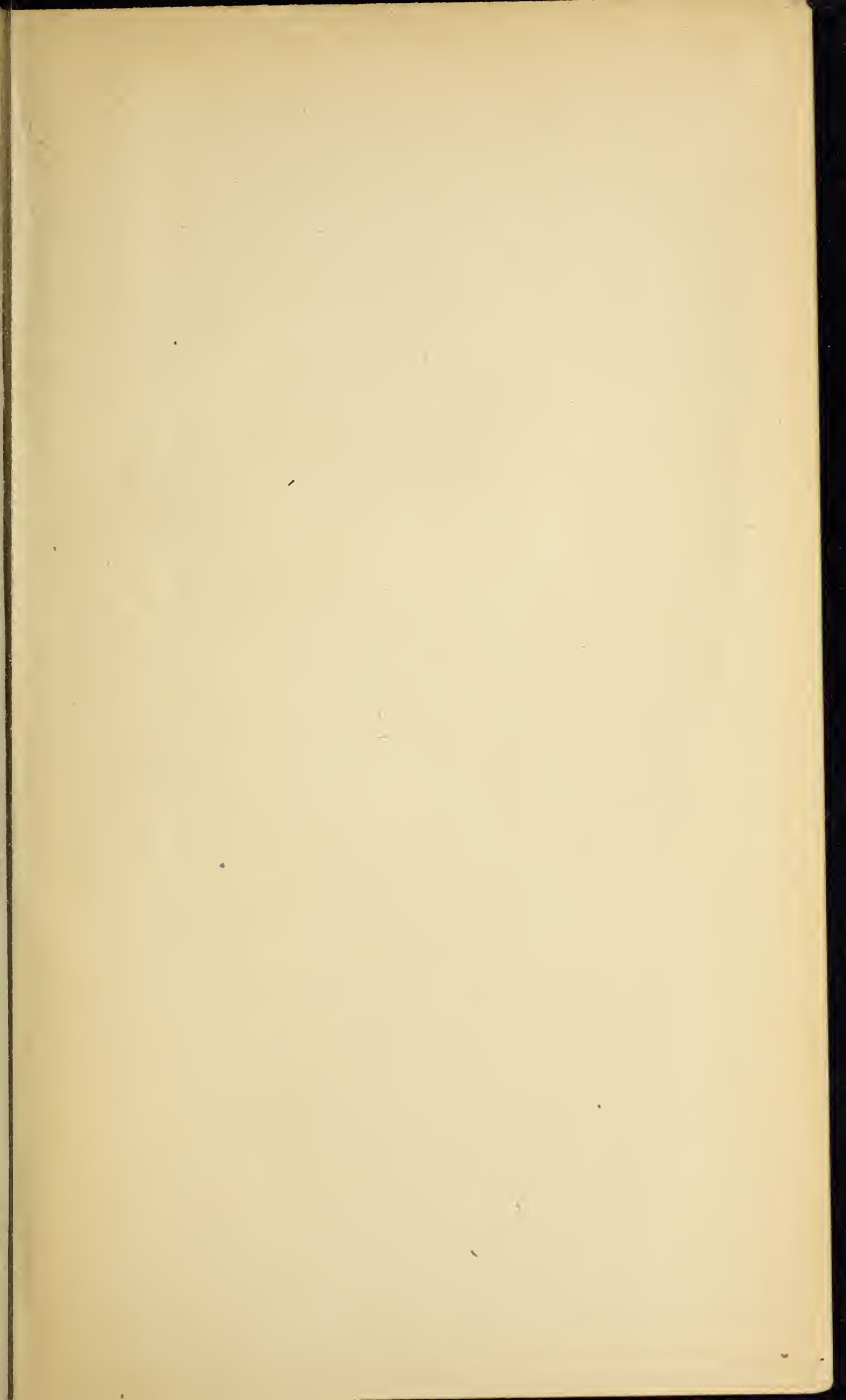


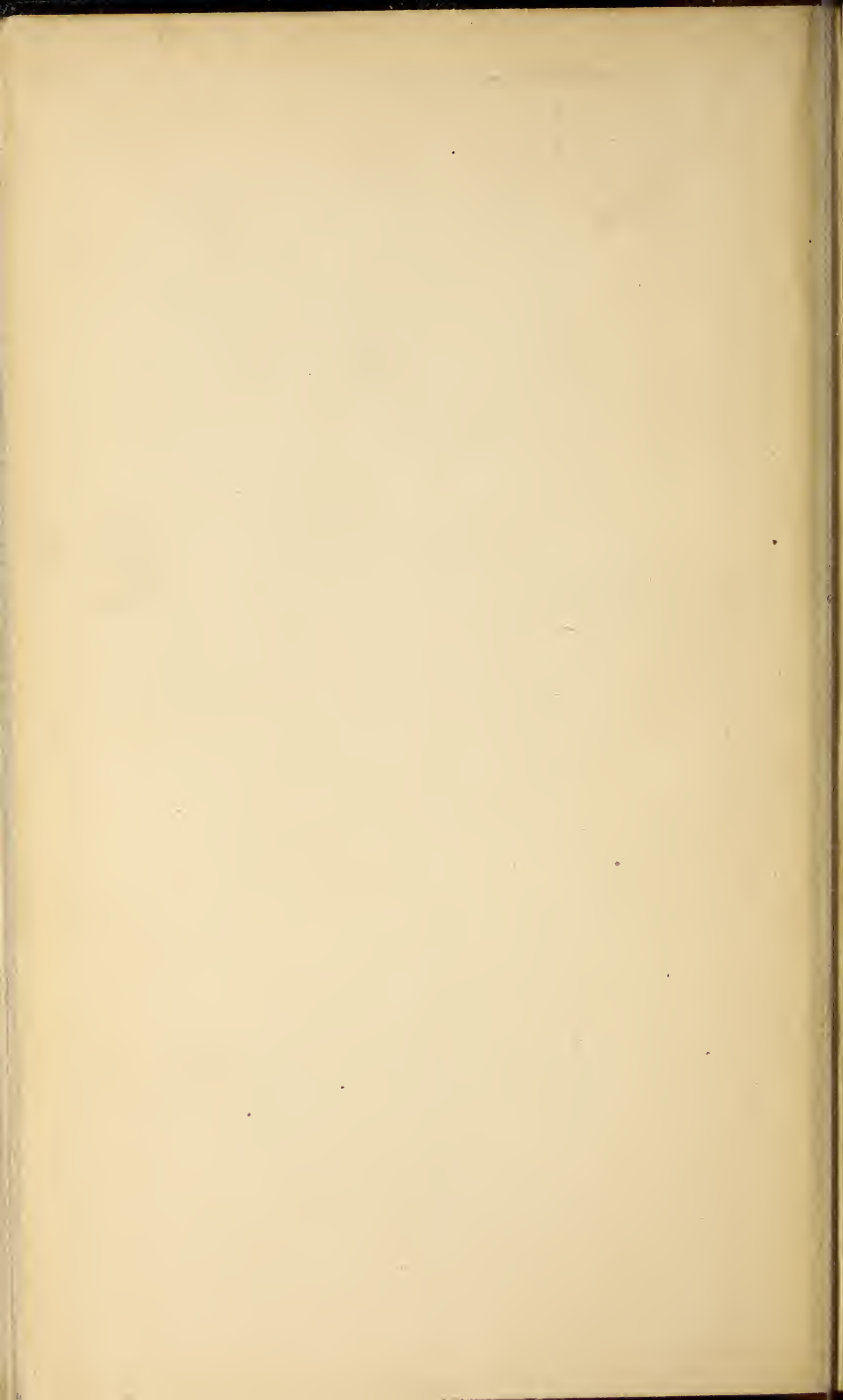












x 70
200

